THE EMPEROR OF AMERICA

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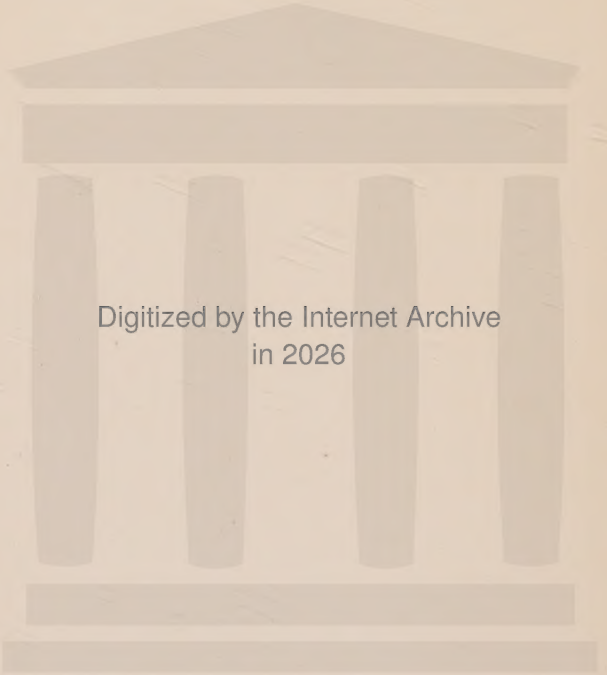

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THE EMPEROR OF AMERICA

BOOKS BY

SAX ROHMER

BAT WING
DOPE
FIRE-TONGUE
GREY FACE
MOON OF MADNESS
SHE WHO SLEEPS
TALES OF CHINATOWN
TALES OF SECRET EGYPT
THE DREAM DETECTIVE
THE EMPEROR OF AMERICA
THE GOLDEN SCORPION
THE GREEN EYES OF BAST
THE HAND OF FU-MANCHU
THE INSIDIOUS DR. FU-MANCHU
THE QUEST OF THE SACRED SLIPPER
THE RETURN OF DR. FU-MANCHU
THE YELLOW CLAW
YELLOW SHADOWS

THE EMPEROR OF AMERICA

By SAX ROHMER

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THE EMPEROR OF AMERICA

CHAPTER I

The Zones

§ I

THE curtain draped before a cabin above which appeared the word "Surgeon" was drawn aside.

"Wanted on the 'phone, sir," a voice announced.

Dr. Stopford of the Atlantic flier *Ruritania* disentangled his fingers from a one-ended black tie which refused to function, and turned, surveying Huff, his man. Dr. Stopford was tall, slim-waisted, and possessed of light brown hair which grew in little tight waves envied by more than one woman. He was very fresh-coloured and looked ridiculously young. One of his blue eyes was windowed by an extremely small rimless monocle which apparently grew there.

"Look here, Huffy," said he, "why do you always crop up when the battle's over? I've crashed two perfectly good collars because you forgot to leave a stud out. I'm no good at fixin' stiff collars with a needle an' cotton."

"Sorry, sir. You didn't tell me you were dressing tonight."

"Do I ever go ashore naked?"

"No, sir."

"You're developin' bad symptoms, Huffy. I shall prescribe the white mixture if this goes on."

Huff's ruddy face registered consternation, but:

"Who wants me?" the doctor continued, dropping the crumpled tie and reaching for a gorgeous kimono.

"Commander Drake Roscoe, sir."

"What!" exclaimed Stopford. "Oh, Lord! I hope the 'do' isn't off!"

He hurried out onto the deck and along to where a telephone connecting with shore stood upon a temporary support. He took it up, and:

"Hullo, Roscoe, old scout!" he called. "Who's dead?"

"*I'm* not!" a voice replied, a voice which had a definite timbre of determination. "But there's a change of plan, Stoppy. I have had to put the ladies off for reasons which I will explain. It's a stag party, old boy, and it may end in a rough-house."

"Cheery ho," Stopford murmured. "Failin' dalliance with the fair, there's nothing I enjoy more than a spot of danger."

"So," the voice went on, "wash out the Ritz and meet me at the Lotos instead. Same time."

"Right ho," said Stopford. "Recallin' your lurid description of the disappointed nymphs, I'm naturally soulsick. But at least we can drink ourselves to death."

He replaced the 'phone, glanced down on to the deserted pier, and then went back to his cabin, where Huff was daintily unscrewing the top of a pearl stud.

"Hullo!" said Stopford. "Hullo, hullo! Where did you find it?"

"In the case, sir."

"Extraordinary!" the doctor murmured. "Last place I thought of lookin'."

§ II

At about this time a man was seated in perhaps the most peculiar room in New York City. It was square and some ten paces from wall to wall. It seemingly possessed neither doors nor windows. The floor was laid with black and gold Oriental tiles upon which some dark, rich rugs were strewn. The walls were decorated sombrely in black and gold and the ceiling was a lofty dome of dull gold. Four lamps concealed in tall black tripods illuminated the place by reflection from this dome. There was practically no furniture with the exception of a long, narrow antique table—apparently a communion table—set square centre of the western wall; behind this stood a chair, or, rather, throne.

And in this chair the man was seated.

He was draped in a black gown similar to that of a Master of Arts, and he wore light yellow rubber gloves. These were of so thin a texture as almost to deceive one, in the dim light, creating an illusion of hairless yellow hands—long-fingered and flexible.

They rested before him on the table top, these strange hands; the left close to the base of a standard lamp so shaded as to leave the man's face always in half shadow; the right upon a keyboard. There were many curious objects upon the long narrow table, but no human being, entering that room, would have had eyes for them. He would have seen nothing but the shadowed face of the one who sat there, silent, motionless.

It was a dead yellow face—the face of a mummy. The eyes appeared superhumanly long, like the eyes of an Egyptian god. The nose was shadowy, indistinct, the mouth a mere slit. No hair crowned the high skull.

The effect was indescribably terrifying until one realized that this yellow horror was a wonderful mask of the same delicate texture as the gloves.

Now, the man so hideously disguised depressed one of the keys at the same moment that a point of green light, like the eye of some animal, appeared upon the blank black wall of the room before him.

A voice, having intonations suggesting the Levant, spoke. From the sound one must have supposed the speaker to be in the room. But the room, which contained no visible speaking tube and no telephone, remained empty except for that one appalling occupant.

"Zone Officer 3 B is here."

No movement showed upon the yellow mask when the man at the table replied. He had the accent and intonations of culture but laid undue stress upon certain vowels. His tones were smoothly musical.

"Observation Room," he said.

He depressed another key. The point of green light disappeared. He touched a switch. The room became plunged in darkness. Then, uncannily, a thing seemingly supernatural—the form of a man—took shape in the darkness!

The phantom was that of one sunk deep in materialism, a physically powerful man, heavy-jowled and small-eyed. His short, curved nose was like the beak of a vulture, and, holding a soft hat in one hand, he was

looking about him suspiciously. This was a gross, uneasy shadow.

For fully five minutes the masked man sat studying it, then, as soft light reflooded the room, the apparition vanished. A key was touched—and the point of green sprang up.

"I will see him."

Having spoken, he depressed the second key and the green light went out. Twenty seconds later a door slid noiselessly open in the south wall, revealing a small elevator. In the elevator stood the substance of the shadow.

Seen in the flesh and in his natural colouring, the man was less sinister than his image. His reddish hair, close-cropped, showed gray at the temples. Save for the evasive little eyes and that bird-of-prey nose, he might have passed for a decent citizen. He was by nature a fellow sure of himself, but he came out into that black and gold dome-room with marked hesitancy.

The door closed silently. He stood staring at the man behind the table, and his free hand opened and closed spasmodically. Then:

"Zone Officer 3 B," the suave voice began, "why did you fail to report to your Divisional Headquarters that Mr. Peter Champion received a visit from you at midnight on Wednesday last?"

The man addressed failed utterly to hide his consternation. He moistened his lips and was about to attempt some reply, when:

"I accept no excuses," the smooth voice added. "But I await an explanation."

For perhaps fifteen fateful seconds the man hesitated.

"I went on Zone work," he finally replied.

His voice was somewhat hoarse.

"By whose orders?"

"Nobody's. I thought he was worth covering, that's all."

From his place at the extreme end of the room he was staring, staring, at that dead yellow face.

"I admire your zeal," the suave tones commented, "but not your neglect of routine. Explain it."

Moistening his lips again:

"I got to know Champion by ringing him up and telling him that his house was being watched by cat-burglars," the man replied. "Then I called late last Wednesday night and sent my card in. So far there was nothing to report."

"Wrong," the masked man interrupted gently. "You were promoted to charge of Zone 3 B in January, 1927. You know the regulations as well as I."

He touched a key. Before him, upon the hitherto blank wall, a map of New York appeared, brilliantly illuminated. It was a large and a wonderfully detailed map. It had many strange features: the most notable its division into a series of zones, distinctively coloured. Their centre was a spot in the heart of the city.

"Refresh your memory," he directed.

The visitor turned and stared, as if hypnotized, at the Zone map. It suddenly disappeared. The wall became blank again.

"You see," said the musical voice. "The Champion home is in Zone A 1."

No one, listen intently though he might, could have determined whether the smooth, formidable creature enthroned behind the table believed the man's story or otherwise. However, apparently he did, for:

"Be very careful," he went on. "Your explanation is unsatisfactory. Peter Champion is not in your Zone. You have deliberately broken two vital regulations. First—you have failed to report to your Divisional Headquarters; second—you have undertaken inquiries, without orders, outside your Zone. Forward your proper report not later than noon to-morrow. You may go."

In obedience to some control under the speaker's hand, the door of the elevator shaft slid open—and Zone Officer 3 B turned and went out. The door closed again; the green light appeared.

"Exit Seven," that gentle voice commanded. "Connect H.Q."

As the green light vanished a red one took its place.

"Cover the man leaving by Exit Seven," came the order. "File quarter-hourly reports."

Glancing at a note on his table, the speaker manipulated the keyboard, causing the green light to reappear.

"Zone Officer 2 A is here," the Levantine tones announced.

"I will see the officer."

A few moments later the elevator door opened again—and a woman entered composedly. The door closed behind her.

From her smart little hat crushed down rakishly upon short, coppery hair to the tips of her pointed shoes she displayed the chic which Paris gives. She was rather

above medium height, slender but curvy. Her features were irregular, yet, when she spoke, or more particularly when she smiled, few men would have denied her beauty. Her charming accent proclaimed her to be a daughter of France.

Her self-possession in that uncanny room and in the presence of the masked horror was admirable. The man at the table did not stir when she inclined her head in greeting, but:

"Zone Officer 2 A," he said—and his voice was smoother than ever—"your work has been excellent. To-night, Commander Roscoe will be at the Lotos Club and not at the Ritz. He has realized his danger. He and his friend will dine alone. Detail a Sector captain to trace the restaurant selected. Report to the chief chemist."

The girl—for she was little more—started involuntarily. Her expression hardened, lending a sudden angularity, almost haggard, to her face.

"I, myself, am to carry out this?" she asked.

"In person."

"It is not——?"

"It is not your affair," said the masked man suavely. "You are in no way responsible. But success means promotion. Start at once."

The elevator door slid open.

Still composedly, but wearing an oddly set expression, Zone Officer 2 A turned and went out. The door closed. The red light glowed.

"H.Q.," said a voice.

"Send out a General Emergency order. All units to stand by until further notice."

The red light faded. The man at the table raised his gloved hands and unfastened the hideous mask.

§ III

Peter Champion, sometimes referred to as "The Lumber King," paced from end to end of his plainly furnished study. He looked what he was—a retired woodsman—but he didn't look like a man who could write his personal check for five millions and know it would be honoured.

Although it was past the social dinner hour he wore a rough tweed suit by no means fashionable in cut. The pictures on his walls were of giant trees, monarchs of some northern forest; his study appointments were practical and unornamental. This great old New York house which he had bought to please his wife was like an echoing mausoleum, now that his wife had left him. And his son——

But Peter Champion's grim face, which looked like a carving in mahogany, chiselled by Jacob Epstein, told a curious world that the old lumberman still stood, a mighty tree in the financial forest—ruffled but unbowed by the storm.

His big gnarled hands, which even to-day could wield an ax with any man living, opened and clenched, and opened and clenched, as he paced ceaselessly up and down the silent room. Once he paused, listened intently for some moments, and then resumed his bear-like promenade.

Suddenly the note of a telephone bell brought him up sharply. Crossing to the littered table:

"Yes?" he said, speaking with studied calm. "Peter Champion here."

"Louis Meyer," reported the man at the other end. "I've got some more information for you, Mr. Champion. It is urgent."

"Where are you?"

"In Brooklyn. I've had to double on my tracks God knows how many times. But I think I've dropped 'em."

"What's the information?"

"I daren't trust it to the wires. But I've *seen* him! You understand? I can describe him. And I've seen the Zone map! I'm afraid to stay here longer than necessary. Make a date—quick."

"I'll be home right along. Pick your time. Any hour to-night."

"Good enough. Good-bye."

Peter Champion replaced the receiver, stood stock still for a moment, listening, and then began to walk up and down again.

CHAPTER II

A Pawn Moved

§ I

"SAMPLE this, old lad," said Drake Roscoe, pushing a glass along the counter. "Apologize, but it's a dry country."

Stopford smiled at the speaker. It was a smile of affectionate admiration. Between these two, externally so unlike but spiritually akin, existed one of those friendships inexplicable to the casual observer because based upon subconscious understanding.

Commander Drake Roscoe, of the United States Navy, was half a head shorter than Dr. Stopford, built like an acrobat, tanned with that deep-sea tan which looks as though it went through to the bone, and having the clear, wide-open gray eyes—those peculiarly frank eyes of the sailor. His dark, crisp hair was never seen disarranged, and in uniform he looked like a younger brother of Earl Beatty.

The half smile of whimsical amusement which was his habitual expression to-night was absent.

"Cheery ho, old scout!" Stopford murmured, and sipped his drink. "The sky is overcast this evening, so to speak. Glass droppin'?"

Roscoe shook his head.

"I'll tell you later," he replied. "I have a sort of premonition, Stoppy."

"The white mixture as directed," said Stopford. "Three times a day. Shake well before takin'."

Roscoe's charming smile struggled through.

"There's hot work afoot," he assured the other, and glanced suspiciously about him. "To-night I expect the crisis!"

Stopford's expression underwent a subtle change. Only a very close observer would have noted it. But, noting, such an observer would have asked himself which was the real Stopford—the perfectly groomed young doctor to whom nothing on earth was serious or the other man hidden below the surface.

"I'm with you," he said quietly. "Carry on. What is it? Graft?"

Roscoe's cleanly chiselled face was grim. Gray eyes met blue eyes.

"No." He bent to Stopford's ear. "It's murder! I have booked a table at a new place. It's fairly quiet. More when we get there. Stopford—" he cast an other of those odd, hunted looks around the room—"this city is jazzing over a subterranean volcano—and to-night you and I are liable to fall in!"

§ II

The restaurant in which presently they found themselves was all that Roscoe had promised. It was quiet, discreet, and expensive. A table in a shady alcove awaited them. Here, speaking in subdued tones, Com-

mander Drake Roscoe unfolded a story which caused Dr. Stopford to remove and burnish his eyeglass—a sign of extreme agitation.

"You have just asked me," said Roscoe, "if I have merely piled up my ship or if the United States is scrapping her Navy. The answer is No in both cases. I am temporarily seconded, and on special service work. You recall the row at Boston last year?"

"Clearly. What was it?"

"It was a scheme to blow up one of our latest battleships! I crossed the course of the plot and saved the ship. But the man at the bottom of the business slipped through our fingers. Then came the Panama Canal job. Probably you never heard of this?"

"Probably not."

"It would have upset the world's shipping for a year —perhaps longer! It would have put a big British battle fleet out of touch with us. And it would have exposed our most vulnerable flank to ——"

"To what?"

Roscoe glanced cautiously in the direction of their nearest neighbours, then:

"I don't know to what," he confessed. "But I do know something else."

"Such as?"

"The same man was handling the conspiracy! And do you know where he was handling it from?"

"No, sir."

"From New York!"

"He must have beastly long hands."

"Call 'em tentacles!" said Roscoe harshly. "He's a

King Octopus. God knows how many he's strangled. But he feeds on dollars—and a week ago I traced one of his feeding grounds."

"Be more lucid. Cultivate simplicity of style."

"I found out, through Police Headquarters, that Peter Champion—who, as you're aware, is one of the financial group known as 'The Big Six'—had applied for special protection."

"Why? And what has this got to do with the Panama Canal?"

"So you sail on Wednesday?" said Roscoe brightly, in reply.

Whereupon Stopford's eyeglass grew so definitely misty that he removed and burnished it. His blank expression fled, however, when he glanced up and realized that a waiter had appeared with a fish course.

"Yes," said he. "Noon, or noonish."

"Lucky man!" murmured Roscoe. "Wish I could get away for a trip." Then, as they attacked the sole, and the waiter withdrew: "It was the sort of clue I was hunting for!" he went on. "You see, I knew there was big money behind these wreckers—and Washington had instructed that all cases touching transference of large amounts should be filed for my inspection."

"Splendid fellow. High-power brain."

"I saw Peter Champion. Stopford, in the last three weeks there have been two attempts to murder him! Once by a man in Central Park. Once outside his own house."

"Good God! What for?"

"The answer is easy . . . for his millions!"

Stopford ceased eating, stared awhile, and then:

"Dense fog," he declared. "Can't see a thing. Champion hasn't left his money to these philanthropists who blow up canals, has he?"

"Every dollar goes to his only son."

"Getting denser. Engines stopped altogether. In what way would the sudden affluence of Champion Junior benefit these sportsmen? Have you consulted Junior on this point?"

Roscoe looked at the speaker long and hard.

"Peter Champion's son is supposed to be in Paris, studying art," he said.

Stopford sensed the stress on "supposed."

"But," Roscoe went on, "I have closely examined his recent correspondence. While I don't profess to know where he is, I am perfectly certain that the letters mailed from Paris during the past month were not written by Peter Champion Junior!"

"Great Scott! I see it at last! They've got him! Roscoe, who are these people?"

Roscoe shook his head.

"I don't know," he confessed. "But I'm in the game to find out—and for once in a while Fate has dealt a good card to the honest player. During the course of the Boston case I had a passing glimpse of one man whom I had every reason to suspect of being concerned. He vanished before I could trap him. But I knew he had come to New York—and two weeks ago I ran right into him on Broadway. He doesn't know me by sight, you must understand. I managed to keep him in view, and a few hours later I had his dossier on my desk. He

is a certain Louis Meyer, a private inquiry agent with a shady reputation."

"Where is he now? In jail?"

"On the contrary, he's quite at large. I had Peter Champion call him last Wednesday and ask him to come to the house."

"What!"

"Champion put the case in his hands: actual whereabouts of son, attempted murder, and all. He offered him a hundred thousand dollars for evidence that would lead to the arrest of the man or group concerned!"

"What happened?"

"Meyer undertook the job. On Friday he reported that such an organization as Champion suspected actually did exist. He even supplied a few crazy particulars. He said that the whole of New York was mapped out in a series of Zones; that each Zone was in charge of a 'Zone officer'; that each Zone officer had three 'Sector captains' under him—and a lot more incredible nonsense. He hinted at the existence of some awful being known as 'Head Centre' and promised further revelations. Since then nothing has come from him."

"But—Champion?"

"He hasn't left the house for a week! He daren't! We have six men on duty guarding him: four outside and two in!"

"I say!" Stopford exclaimed, his eyes gleaming. "This is simply tremendous! Do you think these bandits know you are out against 'em?"

"I *know* they do! And I am beginning to wonder if Meyer's insane story had elements of truth in it. I received this an hour before I 'phoned you."

He passed a slip of paper across the table. Neatly typed, the following appeared:

COMMANDER DRAKE ROSCOE:
Leave New York at once.

By order
HEAD CENTRE.

"H'm," Stopford murmured, an oddly steely glint creeping into his eyes, "crisp, and to the point. Have you done your packin'?"

"Yes," said Roscoe, "I've got a gun packed in each pocket!"

He replaced the slip in his case.

"Have you any clue to the sportsman who tried pottin' old Champion?"

"Not a thing. There was a gang of workmen about the house up to a week ago, though, installing a new furnace and overhauling the heating plant. They would know his movements. I had all work suspended and the bunch cleared out."

"Excellent!" said Stopford, nibbling an olive. "Takin' it all round, I look for a cheery time."

"My dear Stoppy"—Roscoe bent forward over the table, and his voice had that curious, grim note which Stopford knew—"unless I am greatly mistaken, there will be an attempt some time this evening to murder me!"

§ III

In an otherwise perfectly dark room a point of red light glowed.

"H.Q.," said a clear voice. "Group Master 1, Sector

3 A 1, covering the tap on the Champion house telephone line, reports that Louis Meyer called Peter Champion at 8:10 P.M., from Brooklyn, stating that he had new and important information—that he had seen the Map and could describe Head Centre. He was told by Peter Champion to come to the house as soon as possible. He agreed. Report ends."

"Instruct Divisional Chief B.," said another voice—a suave musical voice—"to remove ex-Zone Officer Louis Meyer from the rolls . . . *immediately*. Notify when this order has been carried out. Communicate with Group Master 4, Sector 3 A 1, inside the Champion home. His hourly report is nine minutes late."

The red light vanished.

But, could the speaker have seen, clairvoyantly, into a bedroom high up in the house of Peter Champion, he would have realized that his last order could not be executed.

Some little time after speaking to Meyer on the telephone, Peter Champion had observed a curious phenomenon. Through an opening in the partly drawn curtains of one of the study windows he had seen a tiny light flashing—in and out, dot and dash—in a high window of the house which faced his own.

Peter Champion was swift to act. He knew the point exactly from which he could see into that room opposite. He reached it in a matter of seconds—a room occupied by Pedro, a Cuban manservant. The room was in darkness, the door ajar, and Peter Champion, catlike for all his bulk, crept in expecting a clear view of the mysterious light.

A surprise awaited him:

The square-shouldered figure of Pedro appeared silhouetted against the window. In his hand he held a small electric torch. And as his employer silently came up behind him, Pedro began rapidly to Morse to that other window across the street!

Not two words had he signalled when a mighty fist was hooked to his jaw—a fist backed by a hundred and sixty pounds of brawn and bone.

Group Master 4, Sector 3 A 1, was off duty.

§ IV

"You will now realize," said Roscoe, "why to-night represents a crux in the case. I have taken certain measures to protect Peter Champion. I don't think they will become effective until to-morrow morning. So that, as I feel responsible for his safety, I shall probably spend the night there." He ceased abruptly, then: "By Jove!" he murmured, "what a pretty woman!"

Stopford turned, following the direction of his friend's glance. A woman was walking down the room toward them. A silver-gray fur wrap concealed her slender figure. Her hair gleamed like polished copper in the subdued light. She walked slowly, taking the short steps of the Parisienne.

In view of their table she paused, and her abstracted expression changed in a very odd way. One would have said that she had seen something, or someone, whose presence had positively alarmed her.

At the same moment Stopford jumped up and:

"Can it be!" he exclaimed joyously—"can it be Madame Czerna?"

The woman swiftly lowered her lashes—to hide the expression which had so suddenly leaped to her eyes. When she raised them again she was smiling and composed. Her smile was extraordinarily fascinating. She held out her hand.

"Why, Dr. Stopford!" she said, speaking with a charming French accent—"how surprised I am!"

And no one could have doubted that she was really surprised. Firmly grasping Madame's hand, Stopford turned.

"Roscoe," said he, "I want to present you to the ruin of the *Ruritania!* We made the slowest run on record when Madame Czerna crossed. It was a conspiracy between the bridge and the engine room! Commander Drake Roscoe."

They chatted for a while. Madame Czerna, it appeared, had been dining alone, owing to the inexplicable failure of a friend to turn up. She was quickly at her ease, except that, when neither man was watching her, a queer sort of haunted expression crept into her beautiful eyes. She was easily prevailed upon to join them for coffee.

Stopford made no effort to hide his admiration, and Roscoe in a measure, too, fell under the spell of the dainty Parisienne. Then came an interruption.

A waiter walked along the room, glancing sharply from table to table. He crossed to them.

"Is it Madame Czerna, please?" he asked.

Madame's expression changed swiftly.

"Yes."

"You are wanted on the telephone."

She excused herself and followed the waiter to the instrument. In the darkness of the lobby, could anyone have seen, her face must have appeared almost haggard. She took up the receiver, then, in a low voice:

"Zone 2 A," she said.

"H.Q.," said a voice over the wire. "Make your report."

"I have joined them. It was easier than I thought. I am waiting my chance."

"Act before ten o'clock. Head Centre's orders."

"Both—or only the one?"

"Both. Then proceed to the Waldorf. You will be paged in the writing room at ten-fifteen."

A question trembled on her lips—in another moment would have been spoken. But a cessation of all sound in the receiver told her that the line was dead. H.Q. had disconnected. And she did not know the number. No one knew that number.

In the darkness of the lobby she hesitated. Her behaviour was that of a woman face to face with a dreaded ordeal. But when she came back to the table, she looked haggard no longer. She looked young and beautiful once more. Stopford greeted her with a smile of frank admiration, looked into her brilliant eyes, and then, as she resumed her seat, frowned suddenly.

"My friend," Madame explained composedly, and shrugged her satin shoulders. "An accident of business!" She glanced roguishly at Roscoe. "You men and your business!"

"He must be a prize chump!" Stopford declared. "Look here—I'm more or less engaged to-night, but

what about to-morrow? I'm moderately free for lunch and tea and dinner!"

Madame dropped her head and seemed to be thinking; then:

"I am not sure," she replied. "But——"

"Let me 'phone you," Stopford said. "When will you know?"

"Will you call me at twelve o'clock?"

"Rather. What's your number?"

She began to fumble in her handbag. Under her lowered lashes she was glancing from table to table. A sallow-faced man dining alone on the opposite side of the room was watching her. Others were watching her, too, but in a different way.

"Oh, dear," she said. "What a nuisance. I must write it for you. But, please"—she looked swiftly at Roscoe —"have you time to get me another cup of coffee? Mine is cold."

"Why, certainly!" Roscoe exclaimed. "And Benedictine? Chartreuse?"

"Thank you, no. Only coffee."

When the coffee came, with liqueurs for Roscoe and Stopford, Madame insisted upon serving it. The sallow-faced man watched, covertly, whilst she put two pieces of sugar in Stopford's cup and one in Roscoe's.

"Don't drink it yet," she warned, adding cream to her own. "It is too hot."

And, even as she spoke, something happened.

A sound of shots fired in rapid succession came from the street immediately outside the shaded windows near which their table was set. It was followed by a pierc-

ing cry . . . the roar of a powerful motor . . . a babel of shouting . . . a distant whistle. . . .

Roscoe came to his feet at a bound. Madame Czerna also sprang up. And in some way—no one could have explained exactly how it happened—the table, with its burden of coffee and liqueurs, went crashing over on the carpet.

"Your frock!" cried Stopford.

But Madame, who had suddenly grown deathly white, smiled bravely.

"It did not touch me," she replied. "Please go and see—what has happened."

Others had the same idea. The proprietor was already arguing this point in the lobby. It would attract unpleasant attention if so many people came rushing out of his premises.

"Special service," said Roscoe in his ear. "Let me out. I'll see you're not interfered with."

Out in the street a dense crowd was surrounding a taxicab.

"They were in that gray car! . . ."

"No. They was on the sidewalk! I see 'em. . . ."

"Five there was! . . ."

"Is it a hold-up? . . ."

Then over all the *charivari:*

"Make way, there!" roared a voice trained to be audible in a full gale from bridge to fo'c's'le-head. "Here's a doctor!"

Piloted by the leather-lunged commander, Stopford found himself looking in at the open door of a taxicab. Through the opposite door a patrolman shone his light onto the occupant.

"Your luck's out, Doctor!" he called. "Sure, he's so full of lead he'd sink in the Salt Lake!"

Crumpled up on the floor of the taxi, a bloody spectacle, lay a heavily built man. His face was hidden, but he had close-cropped reddish hair, gray at the temples. Stooping, the man at the further door lifted the body so that the face became visible.

"Good God!" Roscoe muttered. "It's Louis Meyer!"

§ V

A point of red light glowed in a dark room.

"H.Q.," said a voice. "Divisional Chief B reports that ex-Zone Officer Louis Meyer was removed from the rolls in West Forty-eighth Street at 10:05 this evening. He was proceeding in a taxi to the Champion home. A firing group was detailed. They followed the usual routine. Group master has signalled all clear. Report ends."

"The report of Zone Officer 2 A," said that other, musical voice.

"Report to hand," came the reply. "She placed the tablets in the coffee as instructed. But owing to the fact that the firing group covering Louis Meyer operated outside the restaurant, the table was upset. She awaits instructions. Standing by at Waldorf Astoria. Report ends."

"The report of H.Q. patrol covering Zone Officer 2 A."

"Patrol is here. He confirms report. Roscoe and Stopford left the restaurant, and did not return."

"Who is now covering them?"

"A Sector captain detailed by Zone Officer 2 A."

The red light vanished. Then, out of the darkness, the Zone map sprang into view. Not a sound disturbed the uncanny silence of the room.

CHAPTER III

"You Begin to Interest Me"

§ I

STOPFORD, hemmed in by an excited crowd, bent over the body of the man in the taxi. Suddenly he became aware of a steely grip on his left arm. Close to his ear:

"Follow me!" said Roscoe. "Don't argue and don't hesitate!"

"What——" he began.

"Come on!"

Without quite knowing why, or how, he found himself battling through the throng with Roscoe. When they had gained a comparatively clear spot of sidewalk:

"I mean to say," he protested, "we can't leave the girl! And we haven't paid the bill! Our hats——"

"All of less consequence than our *lives!*" retorted Roscoe grimly. "We're on the Zone map! It's a thicker kind of web than I'd figured!"

"Then what do we do now?"

"We run!"

At which, without more ado, hatless and in dinner kit, the pair took to their heels! To Stopford the thing was a page from some fantastic romance. Toward Fifth Avenue they sprinted like hares, flying from what im-

minent danger he was unable to imagine. On the corner Roscoe leaped into a taxi.

Speaking close to the driver's ear, he gave an address.

"Jump in, Stoppy!" he said brusquely. In the taxi: "I want to apologize," he went on, rather breathlessly. "When I found out, this evening, how the land lay, I had no right to drag you into this thing." He stared out through the rear window. "Yes!" he muttered. "Right behind us!"

"Excuse any density," said Stopford. "But I'm out of my depth. Flounderin'. Cut the apology and stick to absolute facts. *Who* is right behind us?"

"A man," Roscoe replied tersely, "who followed us from the Lotos and who is following us at the present moment."

"Good!" Stopford returned. "Admirably lucid. You assume him to be a salaried representative of the sportsman who recently pipped Mr. Louis Meyer. And you gravely fear that he may be instructed to blot your own copybook next?"

"If he were alone I'd know how to deal with him. But this organization is enormous. I am only beginning to realize the size of my job—and the value of my life."

"I'll take the risk at even money," said Stopford. "But, quite incidentally, where are we goin'?"

"To Peter Champion's!"

Stopford removed his monocle and burnished it.

"Excellent!" he murmured. "When there's firin' practice I love to sit on the target. Do you bear a charmed life, Roscoe? I hope *I* do."

But Roscoe did not hear him. He was craning through the front window, talking urgently to the driver.

"Listen," he said. "Your name is John Logan. My name is Drake Roscoe. Keep right on. Do you know Police Headquarters?"

"Sure."

"When you drop us, race right back there. I'll give you a card. Let nobody stop you. You will get ten dollars when you deliver the card."

Roscoe pulled out a case, selected a card, and as well as was possible in the jolting vehicle, scribbled something on it in pencil. The card and a five-dollar bill he pushed through the window to the driver during a hold-up. As they moved:

"You can't catch me with the driver's name," said Stopford. "It's on his picture card. But I'm defeated with the message. What's the matter with 'phoning?"

"Since I saw Louis Meyer," Roscoe replied, "I don't trust the Champion telephone. From to-night on I shan't trust my own shadow."

As the taxi slowed up before the house:

"Off you go!" said Roscoe to the man, and jumped out. "Don't stop."

They stood on the sidewalk for a moment, looking back. The taximan raced on. A second taxi had pulled up less than a block behind.

"Suppose we pop in," Stopford suggested. "I'm feelin' chilly."

Roscoe made for the bell, when a man appeared apparently from nowhere and obstructed his bulk between the visitors and the door.

"Have you an appointment?" he demanded; but, as Roscoe stared hard at him: "Sorry, sir," he added. "Didn't spot you at once."

"All clear?"

"Fairly. We've detained one of the servants. Name of Pedro."

"What for?"

"Signalling from a top window."

"Where is he?"

"Station house."

"Pity. I should have enjoyed a chat with him. How many rings?"

"Three, a wait, and then two."

"Right!"

Roscoe gave the required signal on the bell, and:

"Try to get the spy in that taxi behind us," he said. "Be careful. He's certainly armed."

"All ready!" cried the man, and doubled off just as the taxi was backed to the end of the block.

Peter Champion's door was opened by a second detective. He touched his hat in recognition, and the two entered the lobby. Stopford heaved a loud sigh of relief when the door was reclosed and bolted.

"Have you identified the person this fellow Pedro was signalling to?" Roscoe demanded rapidly.

"No, sir," was the reply. "We examined everybody in the house—it's Number 365 opposite—but couldn't trace him."

"Whose house?"

"Paul Detroit, a big newspaper man."

"Is he home?"

"No. He's abroad."

"Is the house under observation?"

"Yes. All covered."

"Good! Where's the other inside watch?"

"Patrolling. We take the lobby in turns."

Upstairs in the big, silent library, Peter Champion was seated at the table. He came to his feet when the door opened. His right hand remained under cover of the table. Then:

"Thank God!" he said, and dropped back in his chair. "Commander, I've looked death in the face a good many times. But this skulking, and not knowing what I'm skulking from, is breaking me."

"I was wrong to submit you to it," Roscoe returned. "This is my friend, Dr. Stopford. The real meaning of what Meyer called the Zone map is only just beginning to dawn on me."

"Meyer is coming here to-night."

"He isn't. He's dead."

"What!"

"They've got him, sir! This thing is bigger than anything ever before attempted in the way of organized crime. To show you I think so: There are six men guarding this house. I have sent for a raid squad to reinforce them!"

Peter Champion smiled wryly.

"You think I'm not safe in my own home?"

"Until to-morrow morning you're not safe anywhere on the map of New York!"

"It's a long journey to get off it, Commander."

"Not so long as you're figuring. Tell me about Pedro."

§ II

The Zone map faded as a speck of red light glowed in the darkness.

"H.Q.," came a voice. "Group master covering the tap on the Champion home line reports that Group Master 4, Sector 3 A 1—Pedro Cortez—was removed under arrest at 9:35 this evening. He further reports that he himself is confined in the Paul Detroit house under police guard with other members of the staff. Report ends."

"Instruct Sector Captain 3 A 1," a musical voice replied, "to absent himself at once, against the possibility of Pedro Cortez revealing his name. He is to leave New York by the night train for Chicago. Advise Chicago."

"Sector Captain 2 A 2," the other voice went on monotonously, "reports that he traced Roscoe and Stopford to the Champion home. His arrest was attempted, but attempt failed. Report ends."

"Instruct the chief chemist," came a prompt order, "to detail two men acquainted with the position of the switch behind the Champion garage to act *immediately*. Cover them. Concentrate firing groups from all inner Zones upon every approach to the house. Instruct D Division to keep three lines open. In the event of pursuit, all units will disperse and reassemble in Sector 3 D 1 at 11:30. Move."

The red light went out.

§ III

"Poor Meyer's story of the Zone map was not an invention after all," said Roscoe. "I doubted his tale when you told me, but I believe every word of it now. Mr. Champion, we are up against a powerful organization—utterly unscrupulous—extremely efficient."

Peter Champion rested his elbows on the table. His strong, rugged face looked haggard.

"My poor boy!" he muttered. "God knows where he is to-night."

"Of two things you may be sure," Roscoe replied. "First, that he is alive—hence your present extreme danger. Second, that you will have word of him within a matter of hours."

"I don't follow," Stopford declared. "Why?"

"Because," Roscoe explained, "all morning papers will carry the sensational news that Peter Champion filed a new will to-day. Every cent of which he may die possessed goes to a fund to be employed to establish a public deer park in a spot accessible from central New York!"

"Brainy," Stopford admitted. "Good, quick work, sir. By disinheritin' your son you upset the whole apple-cart of this mysterious gang?"

"That's the idea," said Roscoe. "It makes Mr. Champion safe and it gives us time to trace his missing son. I predict that we shall hear of him within twenty-four hours."

"And I take it," Stopford went on, "without jumpin' to conclusions, that we sit tight here till mornin' watched over by flocks of police?"

"Wrong——" Roscoe began, when he was interrupted.

A shot sounded dimly from somewhere inside the house. The library door was thrown open, and a detective burst in. The three in the room sprang up, facing him. He stood in the doorway, pistol in hand, half turned to them.

"Stand by!" he said. "One of the outside men saw someone slip around behind the garage——"

There was the sound of a second shot—a cry.

"Morris has got him from inside," he added, "or *he's* got Morris! Are you all armed?"

"Yes," said Peter Champion, and threw a brace of pistols on the table.

"I have mine!" said Roscoe, tapping his pockets.

Stopford surveyed the weapons critically and then selected one.

A tremendous outcry arose on the stairs. It was drowned in a wave of discordant sound from the street beyond: a shrill wailing, the clanging of a bell, a crescendo of powerful cylinders.

"The raiding party!" said Roscoe—"and the car from the Fire Department."

Then onto the landing came a group of three, two burly detectives pushing a prisoner before them. He was a black-haired, sallow-faced fellow, sombrely dressed. His eyes seemed to be starting from his skull with fright. His large white teeth chattered beneath a frowning moustache. He might have been Greek.

"Here he is, sir," one of the detectives reported to Roscoe. "He got in by jumping from the next-door fire ladders onto those at the back. We caught him behind the garage. He pulled a gun." He gave the captive a ferocious push. "Here he is!"

"Take me away!" screamed the man, whose cries had been audible from the time of his arrest. "I do nothing. Take me out of this house! Anywhere—anywhere! But, merciful God! take me out of this house!"

"He's crazy to be jailed" said his other captor.

"Been begging us to take him to the station ever since we caught him!"

And now, lent a maniacal strength by his terror, the prisoner suddenly broke free. Roscoe plunged to his pocket. But the crazed man threw himself on his knees, raising imploring hands.

"I tell you! I tell you!" he moaned. "Listen. It is true. To stay in this house another minute it is death! Now, I have said it! Mother of Mercy, save me!"

Roscoe's face, as he looked down, grew tense and grim as a Japanese mask. Then:

"Clear the house!" he directed. "I want every living soul out on the street in two minutes from now! Hang onto your prisoner, Stendal"—addressing the second detective. "Morris—top to bottom, everybody out, dressed or undressed! Jump to it! Come on, Mr. Champion! Brisk, Stopford!"

As a result, curious observers on sidewalks and in many a window presently witnessed a spectacle unique in that sedate, old-fashioned residential street. Manservants in pajamas, maids wrapped in bedspreads huddled outside Peter Champion's house. Police cars gathered them up. The place was alive with armed men. Double patrols were at every corner. A great red car belonging to the Fire Department throbbed before the door.

Into this, covered by six detectives, Peter Champion hurried. Roscoe and Stopford leaped in behind him. Then a car bristling with detectives led off. The clanging red monster followed. Two more armed parties brought up the rear. Over the uproar:

"You'll be safe in fifteen minutes!" Roscoe shouted.

"Where are we goin'?" yelled Stopford.

"To the *Ruritania!*" was the reply. "It's off the Zone map. And Pier 54 will be patrolled all night by a score of police!"

§ IV

A cordon had been drawn around the area containing the deserted house. At eight o'clock a search-party ventured to explore. They were looking for a bomb—and they started in the garage. Here, they discovered a rough switch and the flex led them to the cellar. It went inside the new furnace.

Exploration of the furnace revealed the fact that some kind of large glass vessel had been exploded. The furnace was full of glass fragments. The party proceeded. Following the furnace clue, they examined the radiators. Every radiator in the house had the valve off. In other words, if steam had been admitted, it would have filled the building.

Mystified, they searched further. Peter Champion's house was old. Its worn flooring and wainscots had harboured many a mouse, several rats, and not less than a thousand roaches.

These, to a rat, to a roach, had quitted their hiding places. They lay dead on carpets, on polished floors, on bookcases. They littered the kitchen; their corpses disfigured even the library. The place was a cemetery of vermin. On the fourth floor, looking at a dead mouse lying near the leg of a grand piano, the police captain leading the search party turned to one of his men.

"Have you got it?" he said. "That was some kind of poison gas they loosed off below. There's nothing left alive in the place!"

At about which time Peter Champion, Roscoe, and Stopford were taking early coffee with the captain of the *Ruritania*. The newspapers had just come aboard; and every paper featured the quixotic will of Peter Champion, made public at his attorney's request.

A quartermaster's respectful knock interrupted the conversation. Roscoe was wanted on the telephone.

He went down to the deck. He had saved Peter Champion. With moderate optimism he might hope that Champion's son was out of danger. He took up the instrument, and:

"Yes," he said. "You called me?"

"Congratulations," came a musical voice. "Commander Roscoe—you begin to interest me."

CHAPTER IV

Stopford Goes Ashore

§ I

"You know when we sail, Stopford?" said the Commander.

"You bet I do, sir! Sharp on the tick of one, ack-emma."

The captain of the *Ruritania* wheeled round in his chair and stared at his senior surgeon. Dr. Stopford, his wavy brown hair immaculate, his mufti odorous of Bond Street, returned this scrutiny unmoved. His small rimless monocle glittered in the rays of the cabin lights.

"I quite understand your anxiety." The seaman's keen eyes watched Stopford steadily. "But it is close on eleven. All passengers will be embarked by midnight. Even if you cut it very fine, what chance have you in two hours of tracing Commander Roscoe?"

"I don't like his silent wire. I don't like the way he slipped ashore some time after dinner without tippin' me off. He's up against the biggest murder gang New York's bred to date—*you* know that, sir. I can't sit idle. He's one of my best pals. He may need help."

"Quite so, Stopford. But the pier is stiff with detectives . . ."

"Not one of whom has seen him!"

"Certainly extraordinary. But Police Headquarters has been notified. What more can *you* do?"

"Well . . ." Stopford removed his monocle and burnished it with a silk handkerchief. "I've got a couple of theories—probably fatuous; but I'd feel happier if I followed 'em up."

"Do so by all means," the captain replied. "If you miss the ship, your case will rest with Liverpool. *I* shall be powerless."

"Thank you, sir." Stopford stood up. "I quite understand that."

"One o'clock sharp! Good luck."

As Stopford came down the gangplank, Pier 54 resembled a nest of wasps. Baggage was being moved here and there. Derricks squealed. Cranks rattled. Deck hands shouted. Dock workers thrust through groups of passengers, regardless of said passengers' comfort. Passengers rushed hither and thither. Customs officials remained calm; so did Thomas Cook and the American Express Company. Ship's officers looked on indifferently. There were men who had lost sailing permits and women who had lost husbands; radiant visitors in evening dress with armfuls of orchids; weary travellers in morning dress with arms full of babies. Pandemonium was the watchword. A stranger might have asked: "When was war declared?" He would have been told: "At one hour after midnight the *Ruritania* leaves for Cherbourg and Southampton."

Through this tantivy Stopford made his way to the staircase.

When a man is so badly "wanted" by a New York criminal group that he is forced to seek shelter under

another flag, the fact points to a dangerous and highly efficient organization. When the man happens to be a prominent officer of the United States Navy, the power of such a group is palpably formidable.

These things Stopford fully understood. He felt fairly confident that Roscoe had slipped through the invisible cordon. But he was determined not to sail until he was sure.

No one could have suspected that he knew himself to be in almost precisely the same case as when (he was a student in those days) he had gone ashore from this very ship in charge of medical stores. That had been Gallipoli. This was New York. But the danger was no less.

A junior purser of the *Ruritania* was paying off a taximan as Stopford came out. It was sheer good luck, amid that traffic stream, fighting a tortuous course through mountains of baggage being demolished by demon porters, that the doctor spotted his man.

"Hi! Deacon! Hang on to that taxi!"

Convinced that his every movement was watched, Stopford welcomed Deacon's appearance. This was a taxi he might safely hire. Every other, to-night, was to be distrusted. He was now on the Zone map. And his route lay through Hell's Kitchen.

"Hullo, Doctor! You're surely not going uptown?"

"I'm going to West Forty-fourth Street," said Stopford, jumping in. "Between Fifth and Sixth."

"But"—Deacon stared aghast and then glanced up at the big illuminated clock—"you'll just him the after-theatre rush. You can never do it, Doctor."

"You may be perfectly right," Stopford agreed. "But

tell the bloke drivin' the cab where I want to go to. Be a good chap, Deacon. I'm rather pushed for time."

For long enough after the taxi had disappeared—extricated from that moving maze by means of some sixth sense possessed solely by taxi drivers—the junior purser stood staring after it. His reverie was interrupted by a question:

"Who's your crazy friend?"

Deacon turned and stared into the speaker's face. By nature truculent, he was swiftly responsive to a stranger's undue familiarity.

"That was Governor Smith," he snapped savagely. "Anything else you want to know, Mr. Hoover?"

§ II

In a small, square room, high above New York City, a man sat at a long, narrow table. The room was draped in strange shadows. A pedestal lamp on the table afforded the only light. A shadowy dome crowned the room, and the rays of the lamp fell upon the figure of the man. This figure resembled nothing human; it might have been that of an animated mummy. There was no sound. A long yellow hand was stretched out to a press button. A point of red light appeared in the darkness.

"H.Q.," said a clear sing-song voice.

The indefinable creature spoke, in musical, cultured accents.

"Report of Divisional Chief B."

"Report to hand," the sing-song voice went on. "Commander Roscoe is not in the B Zones. Report ends."

The voice was as that of one standing in the room. But none had entered, and there was no visible mouthpiece nor did the table carry a telephone.

"Report of Zone officer in charge of party covering the *Ruritania*."

"To hand. Zone Officer 3 C reports that Roscoe was not seen to leave the ship by way of the pier. Group master covering from North River confirms. Sector Captain 3 C 3 has advised that steward who went ashore at ten-seventeen, after proceeding to Roscoe's apartment and finding it empty, went across to Hotel Memphis, immediately opposite on West Forty-fourth Street, and booked accommodation for Dr. Stopford. Steward is in room. Sector Captain 3 C 3 standing by at Hotel Memphis. Report timed eleven P.M.—at which hour Stopford was still on board. Report ends."

Followed some moments of complete silence. Then, the long yellow hand touched a key. Out of the darkness masking the opposite wall a map of New York City leaped to sudden life. It was brightly illuminated. It was divided into series of zones, each distinctly coloured. In response to some silent manipulation of the yellow fingers, half the map disappeared. A full minute passed; then:

"Instruct Zone Officer 2 A," the man at the table ordered, "to proceed to the Hotel Memphis, relieve Sector Captain 3 C 3, and establish touch with Dr. Stopford in the event of his arrival. Instruct Zone Officer 3 C to report immediately if Stopford leaves the ship. Cancel previous order. Failing his taking a cab under Group control, a Group master is to follow.

Withdraw H.Q. patrol from Pier 59 and let him proceed at once to Hotel Memphis. File his reports at fifteen-minute intervals."

The red light went out. The Zone map disappeared.

§ III

Stopford peered out anxiously through the rear window of the taxi. The name of his driver, Patrick Milligan, was reassuring, even if the fact that he had brought Deacon from somewhere uptown had not proved him disassociated from the Zone group.

Part of the route was through unsavoury territory, and at a point west of Fourth Avenue Stopford detected a pursuer. Another taxi was following. A man standing on a street corner, cigar in mouth, hands in pocket, stared hard as Stopford's cab passed. Now, peering back, Stopford saw a swift signal exchanged between this man and the driver of the pursuing cab.

"Good enough!" he murmured, and pulled out his cigarette case. "They're after me. I'm the individual they require!"

His association with Commander Roscoe had attracted the attention of that shadowy but formidable being known as "Head Centre."

He breathed more freely when at last they came out on to the lower end of Fifth Avenue. The prospect of a holdup faded. But now, with every block passed, pressure of theatre traffic ahead began to make itself felt. Remorselessly his wrist watch recorded the death of minutes.

At last, held up below Forty-second Street, he leaned

through the window and thrust a dollar into the driver's hand.

"Here!" said he. "I'm gettin' out. I can do it quicker at the double!"

Whereupon, gaining the sidewalk, he set off at a brisk trot, dodging here, ducking there; now on the roadway, now brushing a shop window: a phantom Rugger match, this, the forwards beaten, but the weight of the pack, unknown, ahead. A patrolman on the corner outside Fifth Avenue Bank stared hard. Stopford sprinted along Forty-fourth Street.

Roscoe had occupied an apartment here for some time, and the elevator man knew Stopford. He looked in amazement at the breathless surgeon.

"Commander ain't been in since yesterday forenoon, sir."

"It's urgent!" Stopford glanced back along the lobby toward the entrance door. "Take me up, quick!" As they shot by several floors: "You have a pass-key?"

On the sixth floor, where Roscoe's apartment was situated, the man opened the elevator, and:

"Look here, sir," said he. "I've got a pass-key, but it won't work!"

"What d'you mean?"

"The lock's jammed. But that ain't my point. There's some funny game on. First of all, this evening, comes a police captain—sent by the commander. We find the lock's jammed, and he says, this copper: 'I'll be back with somebody to force it.' He didn't. Then, half an hour ago, comes a steward off your ship——"

"What!"

"Wearing his uniform. He come from the com-

mander, too. Must have done, 'cause he had his keys! Said he'd called for clothes and a kitbag, as the commander had spent the night on board and was leaving by late train for Philadelphia. Keys won't work. Off *he* goes. Now, here comes you——"

"What! What!" Stopford stared. "My man, Huff, by all that's holy! Ashore to-night? In *uniform!* But—but—what about gettin' a locksmith?"

"They're trying to find one. But it's late, you see."

"Where did this comic steward go?"

"He said he was going back to the ship."

Stopford gazed searchingly at the speaker. His honesty was hard to doubt.

"Produce the pass-key," he said. "I want to satisfy myself."

He was quickly satisfied—and alarmed. The key obviously fitted the lock, but it refused to function. A horrible idea entered his mind. Roscoe might be in the apartment. . . . He determined to call Police Headquarters.

Down in the lobby, a man who looked like a retired pugilist was standing, apparently waiting for somebody. Stopford glanced in the direction of the telephone and rapidly changed his plans. The Hotel Memphis, opposite, where he had stayed many times, would be a safer spot from which to make his call.

Somewhere a clock was chiming. He glanced at his watch. Midnight.

Then, hurrying across the street, came his first definite contact with the network in which he had become involved. The outside porter of the hotel touched his cap.

"Good-evening, Doctor," said he. "They've reserved you your old apartment. Baggage coming?"

"Reserved my old apartment?" Stopford cried. "*Who* has reserved my old apartment? I'm due on board in an hour!"

The man didn't seem to understand. But Stopford brushed past him through the revolving doors and made a beeline for the reception clerk. He just failed to reach him.

"Why! Dr. Stopford!" exclaimed someone who spoke with a charming French accent.

He turned.

A woman, who had crossed the lobby as he came in, now stood at his elbow. Her slim body was enveloped in a silver-gray fur wrap. Her fashionably short hair gleamed like polished bronze in the yellow-shaded lights. She smiled, extending her hand, and Stopford's heart jumped gladly.

"Madame Czerna!" he exclaimed. "This is miraculous—but beastly annoying!"

"Annoying?" Madame echoed, while he held her hand and tried to look into her eyes.

"Simply maddening!" Stopford declared. "Because"—glancing up at the hotel clock—"I have just fifty-six minutes to catch my ship!"

As he glanced aside, the woman's beautiful eyes regarded him swiftly—strangely. When he looked into her face again, she veiled the tell-tale eyes with lowered lashes.

"I am sorry, too," she murmured. "I had hoped we might have had supper——"

"I beg of you," said Stopford earnestly, "don't mis-

understand. I would poison all my patients to please you! But I'm in a flat spin. Just sit down for two minutes while I find out something; and then—dare I ask you to share a wild ride to the *Ruritania?* There's a bottle of real Mumm, right vintage, at the other end—if we're in time!"

"It is horrid," Madame declared, pouting deliciously, and pronouncing the word in a way that Stopford considered adorable. "But I will come, yes, if I may."

Stopford nodded. His manner was unavoidably brusque. He rushed to the desk.

"Hammond," he said rapidly to the clerk, "who booked my apartment?"

"Your steward, Doctor," the clerk replied, pushing the register forward. "At least, I suppose he's your steward. He's waiting upstairs for you——"

"What! He's up there?"

"Has been since he came."

Stopford ran to the elevator. It was waiting.

"Sixth!" he said, jumping in. "Wait for me."

Two minutes later he threw open a door on the sixth floor, crossed a tiny lobby, and pulled up suddenly. From a widely opened window of the sitting room a man was craning out, apparently watching somebody on the opposite side of the street.

As Stopford entered, the man drew back and turned in a flash. He wore ship's uniform. He was red-faced and possessed a black moustache, neatly pointed.

"Huff!" Stopford's monocle dropped from his eye to the carpet. "Huff! what the hell do you mean? This escapade costs you your job!"

The man addressed as Huff did not reply for a

moment. A dwarf standard lamp alone lighted the room. Stopford advanced, fists clenched. The steward watched him, but did not move; then:

"Thank God you're here!" he said.

Stopford fell back a pace. His clenched hands relaxed. Instantly he sprang forward again, grasped the speaker by both shoulders and peered, a man amazed beyond expectation or experience, into the ruddy face.

"By heaven!" he whispered. *"Drake Roscoe!"*

"Himself!" was the reply—and Drake Roscoe laughed quite without humour. "Disguised for the first time in my life, Stopford, fancy-dress rags excluded. You don't understand. And I don't wonder. Commanders in the United States Navy rarely run about dressed as stewards of the Cunard Line!"

Stopford shook the speaker's hand with emotional violence.

"I think I've jumped on my eyeglass!" he said. "Mind if I confirm my suspicion?"

He stopped, fumbling on the carpet.

"Good lad!" Roscoe murmured.

"Damn!" growled Stopford, still hunting. "I thought you were dead, old scout. I thought they'd pipped you. That's why I'm here. Hullo, hullo! Found!"

He stood upright, burnishing the missing monocle.

"You see," Roscoe explained, while Stopford, composure regained, studied the factitious face of "Huff," "I realized to-day that to go ashore from the *Ruritania* was to court almost certain death. I could have got an escort and possibly reached Police Headquarters. But from that point onward the problem would have been renewed. My usefulness—as Drake Roscoe—is at an

end. I am up against a team that apparently controls New York City."

"I know it," Stopford returned grimly, facetious mask shed, the real man peeping out. "They have had me covered since I left the ship."

"My present appearance," Roscoe went on, "fortunately alive, is due to a conspiracy with the barber of the *Ruritania*. On world cruises he has gained some experience of make-up. Your fellow, Huff, is an outstanding type. Popham—the barber—realizing that I was about of Huff's build, made a good job of me. The clothes Huff lent without knowing the purpose for which they were to be used. They are, I believe"—surveying himself—"his Sunday best!"

"Out of order to come ashore in uniform," Stopford murmured.

"I know. But, illustrating the fact that the greatest man has his limitations, Head Centre seems to have accepted me as something quite normal. Naturally, I went straight away to my apartment. I couldn't get in."

"Neither could I," said Stopford. "Go on."

"This scheme," Roscoe continued, "was a sudden inspiration. That *you* would turn up I never even dreamed. I was just playing for time; and I remembered that they knew you here. To call the ship was out of the question. It's ten dollars to a peanut they have the line tapped. So that what my next move would have been I have no idea. But——"

The 'phone bell interrupted him.

"Hullo!" said Stopford. "Shall I answer?"

Roscoe nodded. Stopford took up the receiver.

"Yes?" he said.

"Please, who is speaking?" a familiar voice asked.

"My dear Madame Czerna," he began, glancing guiltily over his shoulder, when:

"It is you!" she went on, almost breathlessly. "Listen, listen—and do exactly as I say. Do not come downstairs again. Do not try to see me. This I ask for my *own safety*. Stay in your room until I can call you to say it is safe. Good-bye."

CHAPTER V

Madame Czerna

§ I

A POINT of red light glowed in the darkness of a room high above the hurrying, pleasure-seeking throngs of New York.

"H.Q.," said a clear voice. "Report of Zone Officer 2 A from Hotel Memphis. Dr. Stopford arrived at three minutes after midnight. She established touch. He is now in his room. The steward who booked the room is with him. Zone Officer 2 A awaits instructions. Report ends."

"Report of H.Q. patrol covering the officer," demanded a musical voice in the darkened room.

"To hand. Patrol reports that Zone Officer 2 A reached the hotel ten minutes ahead of Stopford. She spoke to him on his arrival. He went up in elevator. Zone Officer 2 A shortly afterward received H. Q. call, was paged, and went to a 'phone box. Report ends."

"Report of Zone Officer 3 C."

"To hand. Dr. Stopford left the *Ruritania* at eleven-five. A Group master followed. Stopford went first to Roscoe's apartment, but, failing to get admittance, proceeded to Hotel Memphis. Report ends."

"The fourth report of Divisional Chief A. This is already six minutes late."

"To hand. Commander Roscoe is not in the A Zones. Report ends."

Followed some moments of absolute silence. A yellow hand moved. The pedestal lamp became extinguished. Then out of the darkness:

"Instruct Zone Officer 2 A to reëstablish touch with Stopford immediately. She is to use every possible means to detain him until the *Ruritania* sails. In the event of her failure, Zone Officer 3 C will be held responsible if Stopford is permitted to rejoin his ship. Advise Zone Officer 3 C. Notify Divisional chiefs that Commander Roscoe is somewhere in the Zones and that his exact whereabouts *must* be reported to me within the next hour. This is a General Emergency Order and cancels all others. Move."

§ II

Madame Czerna, through the glazed door of the telephone booth, studied the lobby of the Memphis Hotel. A few minutes after Stopford had gone up in the elevator she had been called to the 'phone. Closing the door:

"H.Q.," a familiar sing-song voice had said over the wires.

"Zone 2 A."

"Make your report."

"I have spoken to Dr. Stopford. He arrived at three minutes after twelve. He has gone up to his room, but is joining me later."

"Where is the ship's steward?"

"I suppose upstairs."

'Keep in touch. Stand by for instructions."

H.Q. had rung off. But Madame was covertly watching a man who sat in the lobby, apparently reading an evening paper. He was a sallow-faced man, and she had seen him before—more than once. This service—which was less service than highly paid slavery—was beginning to tell upon her sensitive temperament. She had not realized all that it meant. She had never counted upon Dr. Stopford's becoming involved in the mesh.

The sallow-faced man was watching her—unmistakably. He had crossed to the desk and asked for a number. Now he was entering an adjoining booth. A definite conviction came. He was reporting her movements! She took a desperate chance. She called the telephone clerk, and:

"Please put me through to Dr. Stopford's apartment," she said. "Quickly."

Then she gave Stopford her strange message, watching, watching, all the time, the saturnine man in the adjoining booth.

She replaced the receiver and came out, feverishly striving to conceive some plan, when:

"Good-evening, miss," said a gruff, subdued voice. "You *are* a stranger!"

Madame Czerna turned, startled, staring at a thickset bellboy who was regarding her with slave-like admiration. And, as she stared, the plan came.

"Why!" she exclaimed, and dazzled the man with her bewitching smile. "It is Harry from Paris! I am so glad to see you again."

"I'm captain here, miss," Harry confided proudly. "And always at your service."

"Can you please come outside for a moment, Harry? There is something you can do for me."

Wrapping her cloak more closely about her, she passed through the revolving doors and stood in the deserted porch. Harry followed with alacrity. He had been a devoted slave of the beautiful French girl during her stay at the Paris hotel where he had earned his passage home to New York after sustaining an injury in the boxing ring which had ended his dreams of a pugilistic career.

A ten-dollar bill found its way into his hand.

"There's a man in the lounge, Harry, I'm afraid of. He must not know. I cannot leave, because I am expecting a 'phone call. But if he comes out—and he will—could you—how do you say?—put him to sleep?"

"Where is he?" Harry inquired truculently.

"Do not look! He is coming out! *Please!*"

The sallow-faced man strolled out on to the porch, glanced at Madame Czerna . . . and lost all other interest in worldly matters. He passed into a zone beyond the control of Head Centre, the victim of a classical knock-out.

"Poor chap!" said Harry, as the man fell heavily and lay still. "He's fainted! Must be the heat!"

"You are sure—he is not dead?" Madame Czerna whispered fearfully.

"Not him, Miss. Only sleeping! Go in and tell 'em somebody's been took ill. I'll get a copper."

Up in Stopford's room debate ran high.

"Madame Czerna's charming," said Roscoe. "I only

met her once, but she's unforgettable. It's damned unfortunate, Stoppy, But I should take her advice if I were you."

"Nonsense!" Stopford rejoined. "A man can't be kidnapped or murdered in a main street without attractin' attention of passin' citizens."

Yet only a few minutes earlier a man had been knocked out on the steps of the hotel . . . and—save two—not a soul had seen the blow struck. At that very moment an ambulance was whistling its way along Sixth Avenue.

"You know better than that," said Roscoe grimly. "You have seen Peter Champion, a multi-millionaire, barricaded in his home under police guard. You saw Louis Meyer—shot dead in a taxi on Forty-eighth Street. He's lying in a morgue, now, and the success of my job's at stake if I fail to get there before he's moved."

"Why?"

"He was one of the Zone group, Stopford. The police have been advised that nothing found on him is to be touched. But I can't be sure what I'm looking for wasn't taken before he reached the morgue."

"Such as?"

"His credentials. Don't you understand that in a secret organization of this kind, officials *must* have some method of establishing their identity? Think what such a clue might mean!"

He took three nervous paces, turned, and:

"Listen," he said. His manner had grown grimly determined. "As your steward, I have passed so far.

While they know you're here I think I may venture out——"

"They'll be watchin' the morgue."

"I know. But I have a plan. You have met Father Burke?"

"Dear old Father Pat? Rather!"

"Well, he's part of my plan. The other part, Stoppy, and I think your safety as well as mine hangs on it, is that *you* sit tight here. Your rush to find out what had become of me has landed you in a pretty fine pickle! But there's too much at stake for me to hesitate. Wait until I call you."

He clapped the steward's cap on his head and ran to the door.

"Cheery ho," said Stopford gloomily. "Give my love to the Keeper of the Morgue. I may call one day when he's not so busy."

The door closed. Stopford crossed and craned out of the open window. He could see the hotel porch below to his right. A small group of persons was dispersing in the wake of an ambulance just moving away. The sight was disturbing. He wondered if it was specially significant. In the entrance to the apartment house where Roscoe had his quarters a man was standing, cigar in mouth, hands in pockets. The figure was familiar in some way.

Away to the left, in a recess formed by the door of a big store, two other men loitered. A closed car was drawn up by the sidewalk farther along toward Fifth Avenue. A pair of rough-looking fellows were seated on the step of the scenery dock of the closed theatre on Sixth Avenue corner.

A whistle was blown. A taxi drew up below. Squat from that aspect, Roscoe, in his steward's uniform, got in quickly. The cab moved off.

Stopford, conscious of intense excitement, now saw four curious things: one, the man standing in the entrance to the apartment house opposite turned and went in; two, as Roscoe's taxi passed the closed car this car moved off in pursuit; three, one of the men in the shadowy doorway along toward Fifth Avenue walked rapidly down to the apartment house and stood where the other man with the cigar had been standing; four, one of the hard cases sitting outside the scene dock struck a match and allowed it to burn out between his fingers without otherwise using it.

"Sound staff work," Stopford murmured. "Scout in car is followin' Roscoe. Scout in doorway has gone to report this to somebody. Scout with match is confirmin' the facts—namely, '*one* bloke in cab'—for benefit of scout relievin' man at present reportin'. Great good work."

Something—a rustling, the creak of a hinge in the room behind—suddenly brought him sharply about.

Madame Czerna stood watching him.

CHAPTER VI

The Diamond Z

§ I

Two sections of the Zone map of New York City faded from view as a red light glowed in the darkness.

"H.Q.," a voice announced. "Report to hand of Zone Officer 3 C. Sector Captain C 3, covering Hotel Memphis, reports that man unknown either fainted or was knocked out on steps of hotel at 11:17. Removed in ambulance at 11:22. Group Master 4 followed. The steward from the *Ruritania* left in a cab at 11:23. Firing group covering, in charge of Group Master 2. Report ends."

"Report of Zone Officer 2 A."

"Not to hand."

"Report of H.Q. patrol covering officer."

"Not to hand."

Complete silence ensued. In the darkness of that room so high above the city, a brilliant, perverted brain was working out a problem. Presently:

"The identity of the man removed to hospital must be notified within fifteen minutes from now. Advise Zone Officer 3 C. Another H.Q. patrol to be despatched immediately to report upon the situation at Hotel Memphis. Two firing groups, with Group masters, in

charge of a Sector captain, will proceed at once to the hotel. First group will secure access to Dr. Stopford's apartment—Routine A—and report if Commander Roscoe is there or has been there. Second group will cover from lobby. A third and fourth group, with Group masters, in charge of a Sector captain, will ensure their retirement on Forty-fourth Street. Reinforce from Zones 1 and 2. Concentrate all available units on Zone 1. Instruct Divisional Chief C to take personal charge. Move."

More musical than usual sounded the speaker's voice. Only the man who heard it was competent to judge if this fact betokened agitation.

§ II

"Please understand," Madame Czerna pleaded, "that I risk my life to come. See!" She extended her slim bare arm. "I leave my cloak in the cloakroom and then steal up six flights of stairs, like a thief! That is not all. I have done a desperate thing. But you have given me your word. and I ask no more. I can speak now—a little."

Dr. Stopford stared at her dazedly. He had always admired her, since their first meeting on the *Ruritania*. But not until to-night had he fully appreciated how beautiful she was.

"Your friend Roscoe," she went on rapidly, her accent becoming more marked with every sentence she spoke—whereby he gauged her sincerity—"he must leave New York at once! If he does not, nothing can save him!"

Stopford, utterly fascinated, watched her; watched the glorious lights glinting upon her shapely coppery head where rays from the silk-shaded lamp touched it; watched her bewitching, expressive lips, her eloquent eyes, her shoulders, which dimpled when she gesticulated. He watched every line of her slim grace, which, down to the arched insteps, seemed by some magic of personality to express her ever-changing moods.

The fate of the United States was at stake, he believed. Good old Roscoe was crashing into long odds. He, himself, was up against certain retirement from the Cunard Line. But how her voice thrilled him! What eyes she had!

"You cannot know," she went on, in those low, vibrant tones, "what it all means. Even I can only guess. If"—she hesitated, glancing at him swiftly—"if I thought you would understand, one day I would try to explain why I know so much as I do."

"Please!" he exclaimed, and, leaning forward, grasped her listless hand. "Please believe that I *shall* understand."

The 'phone bell rang.

"Wait!" Madame cried. "Wait! Let me think."

Stopford, who had started up, paused. Madame Czerna was mentally reviewing her last orders from the dreaded master of her destiny. "Reëstablish touch immediately. Use every possible means to detain him." Then:

"If it is someone for me," she said rapidly, "do not seem surprised. I will speak to him."

Stopford crossed and lifted the receiver.

"Hullo!" he said.

A sing-song voice, which might have belonged to a Greek, replied:

"Would you be good enough to ask Madame Czerna to come to the 'phone?"

"For you," said Stopford, and beckoned.

Madame Czerna took the receiver, and:

"You wish to speak to me?" she said.

"H.Q.," was the reply. "Is Dr. Stopford alone in his apartment?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure? I understand you can't answer in detail. Do you *know* there's nobody else in the suite?"

"I do not know."

"Did you see the steward go?"

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

Madame Czerna hesitated for three seconds, then:

"No," she said.

"Leave at once," H.Q. instructed. "You are relieved of further duty to-night."

She replaced the receiver and turned to Stopford. Dimly, through the open window, came the sound of a distant steamer whistle. Stopford visibly started. Only one ship on the Western ocean spoke with that deep baritone voice.

"God bless the Old Man!" he muttered. He glanced blankly from his wrist watch, which registered one-three, to the set face of Madame Czerna. "He's out to break his record this trip—and he's given me three minutes. My dear Madame—I've missed my ship."

The *Ruritania* had sailed.

"I must go," Madame explained.

Her manner had become more and more agitated. Her eyes seemed feverishly bright, their luminosity now lending a kind of haggardness to her charming features. Stopford forgot his own predicament, and:

"You are in some danger?" he asked.

She smiled. Madame Czerna had an adorable smile; but now it was without gayety.

"Forget about me," she replied. "By staying here you have avoided—I don't know what. . . . To-morrow, I think it would be best for you to leave New York. I will try to get in touch with you."

She crossed swiftly to the door. Stopford moved to detain her, but:

"Please!" she pleaded. "I simply dare not stop one moment." She opened the door. "If you can communicate with your friend, tell him that if he remains *nothing* can save him. But—remember your promise!"

She was gone.

Stopford stood watching the closed door in a dazed way. The *Ruritania* had sailed. Roscoe was—heaven only knew where Roscoe was! And he? . . . He, without a scrap of baggage and very little cash, was marooned in a city apparently controlled by a mad genius who planned its destruction!

He sighed hopelessly and went across to the window. He leaned out, hoping for a glimpse of Madame Czerna. Suddenly something drew his gaze up from the street. Roscoe's apartment, on the sixth floor and immediately opposite, was lighted! Even as he looked, wondering:

"Hands up!" came a crisp order.

The tone was significant. Stopford obeyed with

alacrity, and turned, hands held high up. A big man, clean-shaven and of powerful build, stood in the open doorway, covering him with an automatic. This man wore a half mask of black silk. As Stopford turned, the man spoke again, in that same crisp manner:

"Get on with it, boys!"

Three other masked men entered. One began a methodical search of the sitting room, a second ran into the bedroom, a third explored the bathroom. Then:

"Have you lost something?" Stopford inquired politely.

"Where's your pal?" was the reply.

"Do you refer to Harold Lloyd or Douglas Fairbanks?"

"Listen! This gun's silent. So will you be if you don't answer."

"Quite obvious. I agree utterly."

But behind the badinage, so lightly uttered, a cold, desperate certainty was taking possession of Stopford's mind. Failing some unforeseen intervention, his life as an insurance risk was unacceptable! At last he was definitely face to face with the Zone gang.

"Not a thing!" reported the searcher of the bedroom.

"All clear here!"

"Same here!"

They grouped sullenly, dangerously, just behind the man with the pistol. He, clearly the leader, spoke again.

"Where's your pal?" was what he said.

But his manner of saying it now constituted a death sentence. Stopford clenched his teeth. His life hung upon his next words.

But they were never uttered. A fifth masked man suddenly entered the room. And, most astounding circumstance of all, he wore the dress and soft black hat of a priest.

"Drop that gun!" he commanded sternly.

Quicker than the words were spoken, three barrels covered him. As they did so, his hand went to the lapel of his black coat. Drawing it slightly aside, he revealed a curious badge, in which, in small diamonds, the letter Z was set.

"Get out!" he rapped. "Leave this to me."

As if some potent spell had resided in the little ornament, an instant change took place in the bearing of the four masked men. The leader raised his hand in a perfunctory but respectful salute, and:

"Zone Officer," he explained for the benefit of his satellites who had failed to see the badge. "Beat it, boys."

A moment later they were gone. Stopford found himself alone with the masked priest. The mask was removed, and there—his face unnaturally ruddy—stood Drake Roscoe.

"Mighty near thing, Stoppy!" said he.

Stopford removed his monocle and began to burnish it with care.

§ III

"It seems more wonderful than it is," Roscoe explained. "I was certainly followed right to Father Burke's door, but not molested. I had a plan. It was this. I removed the 'Huff' moustache but retained the high complexion. Father Pat is fresh-coloured, as you

know. With one of his suits and a soft-brimmed clerical hat, plus his tortoise-shell glasses, I looked a credit to the Church. I called up the mortuary, feeling moderately sure that Father Burke's line had not been tapped. They were expecting me. I gave certain orders. Then I went on there in the waiting taxi. I saw the poor devil's body; and I found what I'd come for. Look!"

He unpinned the badge and threw it on the table. Stopford bent over it, peering curiously.

"From there," Roscoe continued, "I raced straight back to my own apartment. The door was forced. I went in—still as the reverend gentleman. I was not followed beyond Fifth Avenue."

"Why?"

"I'll explain later. Stopford, my rooms have been turned upside down. They were searched some time to-day, reclosed, and the lock smashed. The 'police captain,' who was one of the Zone gang, called to confirm the fact that I had not been there. As I stood in that wilderness of stripped cases and empty drawers —I stared out of the window."

"Got you!" cried Stopford. "Your window overlooks this room!"

"Fortunately, it does," Roscoe answered grimly. "I saw the hold-up. And I flatter myself I was prompt. I tore a strip of black lining from Father Burke's coat and cut two holes with a pair of nail scissors. I raced across. The lobby below is bristling with Zone men. But they didn't try to stop the clergyman in the tortoise-shell-rimmed glasses. The moment I was out of the elevator I scrapped the goggles and tied the silk around my head.

"I risked the procedure—guessing the devils would

wear their badges as in the police force. I didn't know my rank. But the display of diamonds was promising."

"You're a Zone officer," said Stopford tonelessly. "I heard him say so. But am I dreamin' or has the traffic stopped? It sounds supernaturally quiet."

Drake Roscoe laughed.

"Forty-fourth and Forty-fifth streets," he replied, "are barricaded at Sixth and Fifth avenues. A cordon of thirty police is surrounding the block. They expect a big haul. I, less optimistic, am merely grateful that we're both alive!"

CHAPTER VII

The Brazilian Dancer

§ I

THE deputy commissioner took up a telephone. "Send Captain Markham," he directed briefly, and replaced the receiver.

John O'Shaughnessy Burke—feared and respected by twelve thousand odd men of New York City's police under the mystic cypher "J.O'S.B.," and consequently known, but always respectfully, as "Joss"—found himself in a quandary. Deputy Commissioner Burke had heavy, powerful features, black, tufted brows, and a permanent frown. His was the face of a villain of melodrama—except that dark blue eyes looked out from the shadow of that mathematician's forehead with the wistful inquiry of a poet.

A huge cigar, nearly seven inches long, fumed and fretted between his impatient teeth. These cigars were famous in Centre Street as "Joss Sticks."

Visibility in his office was invariably poor: to-day it was nil. Commissioner Burke's revolving chair occupied an oasis in a desert of cigar ash. Numberless stumps littered his trays.

Police Captain Markham came in. The commissioner glanced aside at him through the smoke screen.

"Got your reports?"

"Yes, sir."

"Read 'em."

Markham cleared his throat, then, reading from a paper which he carried:

"Report of Bureau on the sixteen suspects detained in Forty-fourth Street, Forty-fifth Street, Fifth Avenue, and Sixth Avenue on June 27,"

he intoned monotonously.

"Photographs, Bertillon measurements, finger prints, and other records give no results."

"Hell!" said Commissioner Burke.

He swung round, so that his tilted cigar pointed directly at the captain.

"This Commander Roscoe," he went on, "is going to be a hundred per cent. nuisance. Since last night's raid he's faded out of the picture. But we've got his written instructions to hold all the suspects for his inspection. What charge can we hold 'em on? They all say they had legitimate business in that section last night—and none of 'em are 'known' to us." He transferred his cigar from the right to the left corner of his grim mouth, and: "Hell!" he repeated meditatively.

Following a discreet interval:

"Anything further, sir?" the captain inquired.

"Sure. Get out."

The captain withdrew. Commissioner Burke took up another telephone, and:

"Send Mr. Solke," he directed.

A moment later his confidential secretary, Mr. Solke,

came in. Solke was slim and tallish, of very pale complexion. His hair receded much from a high, smooth brow and his light blue eyes conveyed an impression of astigmatism by reason of a trick of half closing them at times.

"Any news of Roscoe?"

"None, Mr. Burke."

The secretary had a soothing voice of satiny quality.

"I shall be at my brother's—Father Burke's—apartment, from three until about five. You know the number. Any word from Roscoe is to be passed along *immediately*. I shall be back in the office not later than five-thirty. I will sign my letters then. Get the car."

Mr. Solke bowed and went out as silently as he had come in.

§ II

In an apartment of the Memphis Hotel reserved for, and that morning claimed by, Mr. Ramón de Sa, Brazilian dancer and movie actor, an odd scene was enacted at something around three o'clock on this same day.

Mr. de Sa, a thick-set young man of dusky complexion, who wore matador whiskers and whose eyelashes were supernaturally black, lolled in an armchair smoking a very dilapidated briar. Stopford stood before him, studying the Brazilian in a superciliously critical manner. Dr. Stopford, usually a living advertisement for Savile Row, looked less spruce than usual. His wavy brown hair was perfectly ordered and his small monocle in place; but his lounge suit lacked distinction.

This irregularity was due to the fact that he was at-

tired in a "ready-to-wear" purchased that morning at a store on Fifth Avenue.

A little behind Stopford, and also studying the seated figure, was a third man, a burly man, black-moustached, his close-cropped hair iron-gray, and his eyes piercing in their regard. This was Ned W. Regan, most famous private inquiry agent in the two hemispheres.

On a table beside the lounge chair were bottles of mysterious-looking liquid, brushes, a box of hair, powder, and other items of a like character.

"Can I look now?" De Sa demanded.

His voice was not the voice one would have anticipated; it had the timbre of determination and was more than a little gruff.

"Not yet," said Regan. "Your hair isn't dry. It's most important your first impression should be good. It will give you confidence. By the way, cut out the hurricane voice. You're a pretty boy from South America, not skipper of a freighter." He turned to Stopford. "What d'you think of him?"

"Simply astoundin'," was the reply. "I never saw a nastier bit o' work in my life. He looks like the latest steps in three lessons, guaranteed, six dollars. I hate him."

"So do I," De Sa declared. "I shall never recover my self-respect, Stoppy. But if I'm moderately careful, and lucky, I ought to get a clear run of three days—and in three days many things can happen. Great snakes!" he laughed. "If anyone had told me a week ago that I should be masquerading as a dago dancer, I guess I'd have hit him!"

Regan glanced at his watch, then, speaking briskly:

"Listen," said he. "This mysterious Zone gang seems to have eyes and ears everywhere. So see you don't start with a mistake. I don't know you. Remember that. I was called to this hotel by Dr. Stopford, whom I *do* know, to look for his missing friend, Commander Roscoe. I'm going to tell the world I'm looking for him."

He paused, raising a powerful fist forensically.

"Right in this lobby," he went on, "you can take it there's at least one spy. After I beat it, you, Commander, will sit down there like a stranger who knows nobody. Then you, Doc, will blow across to the news stand. Mr. de Sa, who crossed with you last year, will renew the acquaintance. You will kindly, and loudly, offer to introduce him to some nice people. Then the pair of you head for Father Burke's."

He stared at Drake Roscoe, Commander of the United States Navy, unbelievably disguised as a Brazilian.

"Grab the mirror," he directed tersely. "You're all set. Your mother would disown you and your girl friend would slap your face if you tried to kiss her."

Roscoe took up a shaving mirror from the table beside him and looked into it.

"Holy Mike," he murmured. "Holy—holy Mike!"

"You're free of New York," said Regan—"until they get a new line on you. Remember what I told you about shaving, and don't forget your Argentine accent. You do it fine, but you're liable to drop into the quarterdeck stuff when you're not thinking."

Ten minutes later, down in the lobby, Stopford came out of the elevator and crossed to the news stand. Someone touched him lightly on the arm just as he was paying

the girl for a copy of *Life*. He turned, staring into the dusky face of Ramón de Sa.

"But—yes!" exclaimed the Brazilian—"it is surely Doctaire Stoppaford! You remember the one who is so sick in the *Ruritania?* It is Ramón de Sa!"

"Gad!" said Stopford, and held out his hand—"rather. When did you arrive?"

"Just this morning," smiled De Sa. "It is nice so soon to meet a friend."

A thin-faced man occupying a neighbouring armchair, and apparently deep in the pages of *Vörwarts*, glanced swiftly over the top of that sheet.

"Mutual," Stopford declared. "I'm at a loose end, too. I was just goin' along to see an old pal—Father Burke. He's holdin' a sort of informal bun fight for a charmin' niece recently to hand from Ireland. If you're free, double up."

"But how perfect!" was the reply. "I am indeed in good luck!"

Stopford blew a kiss to the girl, took De Sa's arm, and walked out on to Forty-fourth Street. A man who had been chatting to the reception clerk turned and strolled out behind them. The student of Yiddish journalism raised his eyes. At first, Madonna of the News stand did not notice him: she was following the departing pair with a lingering look. Therefore:

"Who's that ornamental dago?" he inquired.

The literary lady glanced down smiling.

"Ain't he too cute?" she said. "He came to-day. He's a movie man. Going to the coast next week. The other one is English. A doctor. He's nice, but fresh."

"How do you know the dago arrived to-day? Did you see him come in?"

"No," she answered absently, and bent over her accounts. "I was told. Don't talk. I'm ten cents out on my cigarette checks for the dining room. Somebody's tickled me for a packet of Luckies."

A bellboy crossed the lobby.

"Mr. Einstein?" he inquired.

The subscriber to *Vörwarts* nodded and stood up.

"Wanted on the 'phone."

CHAPTER VIII

Thorn Apple

§ 1

THERE are many tall buildings in New York City, and not a few of these are topped by a towerlike structure. One such building, however, for which already many keen eyes were searching, possessed certain unusual features. The room immediately below the dome crowning the tower was the eyrie of perhaps the most dangerous criminal whose activities had ever disturbed a civilized community. It was a square room; and because it possessed no windows, a day was to come when a clever man should suspect its location by reason of the queer external appearance of the floor upon which it was situated.

Behind a long, narrow table set before the western wall a man was seated at about half-past two on the fateful afternoon that Deputy Commissioner Burke visited his brother. Upon the blank black wall before the horrible seated figure of Head Centre a point of red light glowed. The room remained empty as ever, but a voice spoke clearly.

"H.Q.," came the monotonous tones. "Zone Officer 1 B reports that Bureau of Criminal Identification at Police Headquarters has failed to identify any of the

suspects detained. They are still being held under orders from Commander Roscoe. Deputy Commissioner Burke has sent for his car to go to the home of his brother, Father Burke. Car is being delayed. Zone Officer 1 B standing by for instructions. Report ends."

The dreadful figure at the table never stirred. There followed some moments of complete silence. Then, although no movement of that dead yellow mask was perceptible:

"Instruct Zone Officer 1 B," said a musical voice, "to proceed as arranged. He is to advise the Group master in charge of the commissioner's car to notify exact moment when direction is being changed. Sector Captain 1 B 2, covering Group master, will be responsible for marking this. The car is to be driven to Entrance 3. Sector captain will follow. Transmit this order immediately."

The speaker depressed a button. The red light went out. He touched another. A blue light appeared.

"Laboratory," someone announced.

"Send the chief chemist to me at once."

The blue light disappeared.

§ II

Madame Czerna stood at a window, looking across the pond in Central Park. Her apartment had that odd note of femininity which the Parisienne imparts to her surroundings. And Madame was at least as dainty as her setting. She was dressed to go out in a suit which was the ultimate expression of chic. Her shoes, her stockings spoke the language of Rue de la Paix; and a

tightly fitting little hat was set low upon short, coppery hair at precisely that angle which divides the smart from the raffish.

Her eyes seemed to be watching nothing in the park but, rather, to be looking into a hazy distance. Her pupils were extraordinarily large, making her eyes appear darker than actually they were. A medical man might have said they were dilated.

She was unmistakably apprehensive. She was waiting, and listening, for something—or for someone.

The telephone rang; and she started. Those dilated pupils now contracted queerly. One would have guessed Madame Czerna to be of a highly strung temperament. The instrument stood upon a bureau between the two windows. She took it up, and:

"H.Q.," said a sing-song voice.

"Zone 2 A," Madame replied.

"Hold the line for Head Centre."

Madame Czerna waited. A haunted expression swept over her charming face. At that moment a harsh critic might have been justified in disputing her beauty.

"Head Centre," came a musical voice over the wires. "I believe you are a friend of Father Patrick Burke's?"

"Yes . . ." hesitantly . . . "I know him well."

"Notify him that a cousin of yours, whose stay in New York is limited, desires to meet him. Arrange to take your cousin there this afternoon. Your cousin's name is Gaston Pascal. He will meet you by the Theatre Ticket Office in the Biltmore Hotel at three-forty-five. You do not know M. Pascal, but he knows you. Is it clear?"

"Yes," Madame replied. "It is clear."

Head Centre disconnected.

Madame Czerna stood for several moments holding the instrument in a listless hand. Finally she replaced the receiver and set the telephone on her bureau.

So! her dreamed-of hour of freedom had been claimed by the Zones! The remorseless Zones—embodied in the person of that ghastly mystery known merely as Head Centre. She had had no opportunity to speak; but as a matter of fact she was already invited to join Father Burke's party. There would be someone there, the good father had told her, who, in a short four days from Cherbourg to New York and in two brief interviews since, had come to mean more to her than anything else in her thwarted life. She had been counting the hours—happily, but fearfully.

Her fears had been justified—and doubly justified. Not only was the hope of seeing Dr. Stopford alone, unwatched, now hopelessly dashed by the inexorable call of Zone duty, but also, yet again, she must meet him as a spy—and accompanied by . . . *whom?*

A fiery wave, compounded almost equally of resentment and horror, swept over her. The misery and terror from which the organization known to its members as the Zones had rescued her in the past seemed, looking backward, more endurable than the price she was called upon to pay for her freedom. Freedom! She laughed aloud at the thought. The horrors of French Guiana—Cayenne, Devil's Island—yes! These had driven her to the verge of madness. But this "freedom"! It was the freedom enjoyed by the pampered slaves of some Roman tyrant—the sort of "freedom" which had prevailed in the household of Tigellinus!

Well, she had made her choice: useless to quarrel with the consequences.

She glanced in a little hand mirror, deftly applied powder and lipstick in that almost mechanical way of modern woman, and went out to the elevator.

At fifteen minutes to four she walked slowly up the carpeted steps of the Biltmore Hotel and approached the desk where theatre reservations were made. Although this hotel was usually full of guests, its public rooms, she reflected, seemed to be occupied exclusively by people who didn't live there. Those who had not met someone were apparently expecting to meet someone at any moment. The orchestra in charge of a millionaire's son had not yet added its quota to the bobbilation; but human voices created a din to remind visitors that the stock market was not the only place where people shouted at one another.

A man stood before her, bowing in un-American fashion.

"My dear Fée," he said in French. "You are punctual as usual."

Madame Czerna's heart leaped, and seemed to stand still for one dreadful moment. Not for two years—two long, sorrowful years—had she heard any man call her "Fée." The speaker, his soft hat held to his breast as he bowed, watched her, smiling. But his eyes, his extraordinary, hypnotic eyes, prompted her answer.

"I am always so glad to see you, Gaston," she replied.

She seemed to be repeating a lesson: the words were not her own. But the critical part of her mind remained independent. This was some superior officer of the

Zones. He was not her Divisional chief: she knew the chief. He must be a Headquarters official. She appraised him. Madame knew what was correct in men's dress as well as in women's. "Gaston Pascal" was carelessly but perfectly *de mode* for the occasion. He was a short man; not more than an inch taller than herself. He was slim, dark, aquiline, sallow. He had a magnificent head. Inspiration came:

He was the double of Napoleon Buonaparte at thirty-five!

"I have so looked forward to meeting Father Burke."

The words numbed that critical faculty. This man's eyes claimed her again.

"You will love him," she said mechanically. "Everybody does."

§ III

Deputy Commissioner Burke's car came out of Centre Street. J. O'S. Burke at no time was famous for tolerance; at this moment his humour was little short of murderous. He was ten minutes late. Solke, his secretary, blamed Lazarvich, the chauffeur. Lazarvich blamed Solke. Burke reflected, homicidally, that between a Teutonic hypocrite and a Serbian liar, a mere Irishman fell to the ground. He wondered why his father had ever emigrated, and dreamed dreams of old Limerick where a man could fight out the truth with a trusty blackthorn.

His cigar had gone out. He tossed it into a tray. Then, of sheer force of habit, he opened a silver box fitted conveniently beside him and took out a paper-wrapped

sweetmeat between finger and thumb. A Swiss diplomatic friend at Washington regularly supplied John Burke with these delectable candies, product of a firm in Zürich. Only a diplomat could have secured them. They came in attractive wooden boxes. And they bore such labels as "Chartreuse," "Curaçao-Bols," "Benedictine, D.O.M." Most amazing circumstance of all, they actually held the unobtainable liqueurs specified on their wrappings!

Burke glanced at the label. "Brandy-Hennessy," he read. He stripped off the foil and placed the chocolate in his mouth.

They were on lower Broadway. Grateful tang of cognac acted favourably upon his humour. In an officer of the law such indulgence was doubly irregular, he thought. He had always thought this. He reached for another candied liqueur. Without looking at its label, he unwrapped the confection and popped it into his mouth. Brandy again: extraordinarily good. He took a third. . . .

Lazarvich, through the mirror, was watching him. *Why* should his chauffeur watch him? His duty was to watch the traffic. This was a busy spot too . . . Good heavens! what had gone wrong with the man's face? It was visibly increasing in size! Its image occupied the whole of the mirror, so that nothing whatever could be seen of the street behind! . . . How funny!

Commissioner Burke began to roar with laughter.

This unaccountable merriment, when later he endeavoured to reconstruct what had happened, formed the only cogent link between actuality and phantasy.

He realized that he was mad—ill—drugged: that he was no longer master of his actions. He grabbed at the speaking tube. . . .

§ IV

"*Datura metel,* soft-haired thorn apple, was the variety used by the thugs." The speaker's voice and accent had definite German characteristics. "Opium and hashish were formerly blended with it. My preparation is based upon *Datura sanguinea,* the Peruvian red thorn apple, and the source of the native drug called *Tonga.*"

"He appears to be in a profound stupor."

This voice was softly musical.

"He is in the state called *Kál* by a certain sect located in Nizam. He is conscious of all that is said but is powerless to speak or stir. Whatever he is ordered to do during the next twenty-four hours, whilst in this condition, he will carry out to the letter. This little-known formula explains many political assassinations which have puzzled British officials in India."

"But will he remember?"

"Nothing! You will *order* him to forget. Or, if you desire his death, you will order him to destroy himself."

"If I were sure of his forgetting, I should prefer him to live."

"Be sure. I accept the responsibility."

Some moments of silence followed; then:

"John O'Shaughnessy Burke," said the musical voice. "Open your eyes."

Deputy Commissioner Burke opened his eyes.

He found himself in an apartment which he could

not believe to be real. Above his head was a golden dome. The floor, the walls, the lamps were black and gold. Behind a long, narrow table sat a creature resembling a mummy. A pair of supernaturally long slit eyes watched him hypnotically. He lay inert, helpless, upon a wheeled hospital stretcher. There was no one else in the room, which seemed to have neither doors nor windows. But a spot of blue light glowed strangely, unaccountably, upon the wall before the table.

"John Burke"—there was no perceptible movement of that dead yellow face—"you will leave your brother's apartment at four o'clock and return to Police Headquarters."

"Be more explicit," urged the invisible German. "Remember that orders given during the state of *Kál* are obeyed literally. Make it clear that he is, first, to forget this interview but to awaken on reaching his brother's home, and, second, to remember to leave Father Burke's at four."

Another moment of silence, then:

"When I cease speaking," the musical voice resumed, "you forget all that has occurred since you fell asleep. You will awaken when your chauffeur says, 'Here we are, sir.' You will leave Father Burke's at four o'clock and return to Centre Street."

The flow of words ceased.

A red light glowed beside the blue one.

"H.Q.," said a voice. "Report of Sector captain covering Hotel Memphis just to hand. Ned W. Regan spent forty minutes with Dr. Stopford. He has gone. A Group master covering Dr. Stopford went out ten minutes later. He was joined in the lobby by a South

American acquaintance, Ramón de Sa by name. He invited this man to accompany him to the home of Father Burke. Group master covering. Timed three twenty-five. Report ends."

Fully sixty seconds elapsed. The red light and the blue glowed side by side. John Burke watched helplessly. The man at the table gave no sign of life. Not a murmur from the hectic streets below penetrated to that room; then:

"Connect Zone Officer 2 A direct with me in three minutes," came an order.

The long, narrow eyes became fixed again upon the helpless man. The red light went out.

"I shall now repeat my instructions," said the creature at the table. . . .

CHAPTER IX

The Lost Hour

§ I

"HERE we are, sir!"

Burke opened his eyes. He was in his car—and his car was drawn up before a familiar porch. Lazarvich stood at the door waiting for him to alight.

He stared, dazedly, at the clock in the car. It recorded three fifteen.

"It isn't possible!" he muttered, and took out his watch. Three fifteen.

Burke got out. His head was aching frantically. He felt ill.

"See here, Lazarvich," said he, and broke off abruptly.

Vaguely, indefinitely, he knew that there was some mystery. He had been taken ill . . . *something* had happened to him, something incredible and unrememberable. But above all something that could not have occurred in the twenty-five minutes which had elapsed since he had left Centre Street.

"Five o'clock," he said to the chauffeur, and went into the building.

But a deadly fear had clutched him. He doubted his own sanity.

§ II

"Are we followed?" Roscoe asked, as the taxi moved away from the porch of the Memphis Hotel.

Stopford peered back along the street, and:

"Yes!" he reported. "A man in a two-seater."

"They are covering *you* in hope of finding *me!*" said Roscoe. "So far, we are one point up! I regard Father Burke as an important stepping stone. His brother is in charge at Police Headquarters just now. But it's more than my life is worth to venture near Centre Street. As 'De Sa' I had a chance, but if I'm to use it, Deputy Commissioner Burke must make the acquaintance of De Sa under conditions likely to deceive the Zone gang. It may be necessary to confide in Father Pat. But don't make any move in that direction unless I tip you."

"They are holding the suspects?"

"Certainly. But they can't hold them indefinitely. Many are undoubtedly innocent. Headquarters doesn't know what to look for." Out of the unfamiliar face of De Sa the clear gray seaman's eyes of Drake Roscoe stared. "Among the men arrested are members of the gang; and members of the gang wear a secret badge. I dare not trust this fact to anyone, but I want to see those badges and I want to talk to the men who wear them."

When the taxi drew up before Father Burke's door, a smart two-seater passed close outside and then halted in front of an antique store halfway along the block.

"They know we're here!" Roscoe muttered savagely. "Pay the fare. I'm a professional ballroom dancer. We boys never pay!"

But upstairs, in Father Pat's apartment, Roscoe's distaste for his disguise became acute. Molly O'Hay, the father's niece, newly out from Limerick, was guest of honour. She was unaffectedly and exquisitely shy. She had that wavy chestnut-brown hair which Bond Street and Fifth Avenue imitate but can never reproduce; eyes of deep blue mystery, and the complexion which is the good fairies' recompense to women for living in a land of eternal rain. She was a real wild Irish rose.

Introductions being over, Stopford found himself with his host for a moment. Patrick Burke was very much like his brother, John, except that he lacked the permanent frown, and had instead a permanent smile.

"Where's Roscoe?" he whispered urgently.

"I daren't tell you, Father," Stopford whispered in reply.

"Good enough. I understand."

Roscoe presently joined Stopford.

"She hates me!" he said, his eyes following Molly as she crossed the room. "A girl like that *would* hate a man like I seem to be!"

"The deputy commissioner isn't here."

"He's expected. He's late—nearly an hour. It's a quarter to four and he was to be here at three. I have asked Father Pat in my prettiest Argentine to beg his brother to permit me to view the Tombs Prison later to-day. I want *you* to seize an opportunity to whisper to the commissioner that it is Roscoe's wish that your friend De Sa and yourself should drive back with him when he leaves."

Stopford joined Molly O'Hay who, to the intense

annoyance of Roscoe, was being monopolized by a junior lieutenant who had formerly served under him!

"What d'you think of my comic pal, Miss O'Hay?" Stopford began, unceremoniously intruding upon the naval man's account of a new gun. "He's much nicer than his little whiskers would lead one to suppose."

Molly laughed roguishly. She was thoroughly enjoying her first introduction to New York.

"He has such a funny way of looking at me!" she said. "His eyes don't seem to belong to him."

Stopford, figuratively, gasped. All Ned W. Regan's skill was not proof against this girl's unspoiled intuition!

Further conversation was interrupted by the arrival of John Burke. Molly heard his voice and ran out into the lobby to meet him. He had stepped from the elevator with a hunted look in his eyes. Now, his gaze set on a fine grandfather's clock which Patrick Burke had had sent all the way from Limerick, he was as a man dazed.

"The old clock's wrong," he said, as his brother greeted him.

Molly's soft cheek was pressed to his, but he was gazing down at his wrist watch.

"Not a bit of it, John!" his brother assured him. "It kept good time in old Ireland and it keeps good time in New York. The hour is just ten minutes to four."

The deputy commissioner raised his hand to his damp brow.

"Ten minutes to four," he muttered; "and I left at ten minutes to three! God help me . . . I have lost an hour out of my life!"

§ III

"A family reunion, no doubt," said Stopford. "The commissioner has been here for some time but he hasn't joined the other guests."

"No," Roscoe murmured reflectively. Then: "Hullo!" he said—"here's a friend of yours!"

Stopford turned, and found himself face to face with Madame Czerna! His heart leaped ridiculously. He had had no idea that he should meet her, for he had been unaware of the fact that she was a member of Father Pat's congregation.

"My dear Madame Czerna!" he exclaimed joyously. "This is simply d. v.!"

He ceased abruptly, as a strange-looking man entered the room immediately behind Madame. She glanced at him, and:

"I want you to meet my friend, Dr. Stopford," she said composedly. She turned to Stopford but avoided his eyes. "This is my cousin, Gaston Pascal."

"Delighted," Stopford murmured, and seized Roscoe's arm. "Meet my friend, Senhor Ramón de Sa. Madame Czerna—M. Pascal."

"Most charm'," Roscoe gushed, and performed a right-angle bow. "I am here complete stranger, and my friend Doctaire Stoppaford is so good as to mix me with delightful people."

Father Pat came in and disturbed the quartette. He looked worried. To Stopford's secret annoyance he carried off Madame Czerna to meet the naval lieutenant; and to Roscoe's intense chagrin he presented

M. Pascal to Molly—who seemed to find M. Pascal most attractive.

"When we have time," Roscoe muttered aside, "I want to ask you some questions about Madame Czerna."

Stopford started. It was a matter upon which his conscience was not easy.

"Meanwhile," Roscoe went on, "note her companion."

"I have noted the bird," Stopford replied dryly.

"A strange and unpleasant bit o' work."

"But you have missed the big point."

"His nose?"

"Not at all. The man's a miraculous double of Napoleon—the Napoleon of Austerlitz!"

Father Burke rejoined them, and: "I have spoken to my brother," said he. "The Tombs Prison isn't open to inspection in the ordinary way at all. But as you are a friend of Dr. Stopford's, he's willing to stretch a point. If you'll call to-morrow at ten o'clock he'll have you shown around."

"Splendid!" Stopford said, exchanging a hasty glance with Roscoe. "Could I have a word with the commissioner, Father?"

"Certainly," Father Burke replied. "I'm a bit uneasy about him. He's not himself at all. He's overworking, I fancy——"

"I'm risking it!" Roscoe exclaimed, in his own voice, much subdued, however.

Father Burke's eyes opened wide. He stared at the dark face of the speaker as men once stared at Gorgon.

"Roscoe!" he whispered.

"You know me now!" Roscoe went on. "The only suspects in the place are out of earshot——"

"*Suspects!* Members of this murder gang? In *my* home?"

"Listen, Father! I *must* get to Police Headquarters in the next hour—as 'Ramón de Sa.' "

"Good enough!" rapped Father Pat, the fighting glint coming into his priestly eye. "Wait here just one minute."

He turned and strode out of the room, a living presentment of the Church Militant. He brushed by M. Pascal, who was just coming in with Molly O'Hay. Roscoe groaned.

"You haven't met Uncle John yet, have you?" the girl said to Stopford. "He's in Uncle Pat's study."

"I should so greatly esteem to meet him," Roscoe declared, performing the Euclid bow.

M. Pascal's glittering eyes were fixed upon the speaker.

"Let's tootle along," said Stopford. "It isn't everybody that wants to meet a police commissioner."

Somewhere a clock was striking four.

Father Pat's study was empty. They looked into the other rooms. But John Burke was not on the premises.

From the elevator man they learned that he had left but a moment earlier. In consternation they faced one another in the lobby. Careless voices reached them; a ripple of laughter from Molly.

"Something's amiss," said Father Burke grimly. "He was strange from the outset. What's afoot?"

"I don't know," Roscoe returned. "But I *must* find

out. Yet I daren't reveal my identity—and without doing so what chance have I to follow him?"

"Every chance!" Father Burke assured him. "You've come to me before, and I never failed you, did I? Where do you think poor John has gone?"

"Back to Headquarters."

"Then that's where *we're* going!"

"What! Your guests——"

"Molly's the attraction! Besides, I can be back by five o'clock."

And so, two minutes later, a dark-faced Brazilian, a monocled imperturbable ship's doctor, accompanied by a burly priest, hatless in his eagerness, were proceeding in a taxi to Centre Street.

"Among that bunch of sixteen," said Roscoe, "are many decent citizens. And there's going to be bad trouble if we hold them another night. But among 'em also I'll stake my job are members of the Zone gang! I have means of identifying them that I haven't dared to pass on even to the police. I don't know who to trust!" He paused; then: "Have you known Madame Czerna long?" he asked abruptly.

"Why?" demanded Father Pat. "I have known her, I think, since she came to New York. She's one of my congregation."

"And her cousin?"

"Never seen him before. She called up to-day to ask if she might bring him along."

"Nasty bit o' work," Stopford murmured.

"Why do you ask?" the priest insisted.

Roscoe glanced at Stopford; then:

"I am quite naturally curious about the people I

don't know," he replied evasively. "I'm carrying my life in my hands just now."

Traffic delays were more than usually maddening, and when at last they came to Police Headquarters, much priceless time had been squandered. The presence of Father Burke insured prompt admittance. The three entered that smoky office from which the complicated machinery of New York City's police was controlled.

Deputy Commissioner Burke was seated at his desk. His habitual cigar was missing. He looked up as his brother came in, and his strong face was pathetic.

"What's the matter, John?" the priest asked. "Why did you run away like that?"

Commissioner Burke raised his hand dazedly to his forehead.

"Pat," he replied, "I've been sitting here ever since I got in, trying to puzzle out just that!"

"You mean you don't know why you left?"

"I can't imagine why I left! What's worse—I can't remember leaving!"

He fixed a haggard look on the dark face of "Ramón de Sa."

"You naturally wonder what I'm doing here," said that synthetic Brazilian. "But my voice will tell you. I'm Drake Roscoe!"

The door opened, and a police captain came in. He carried an official form.

"All correct, sir," he reported. "The sixteen suspects have been released as ordered——"

"What!"

The word was uttered as a roar. John Burke leaped

from his chair, eyes glaring, fists clenched. Captain Markham fell back in consternation.

"*Whose* orders?" Roscoe demanded tersely.

The police captain stared at the speaker. His imperious manner was not in harmony with his appearance.

"Answer!" bellowed the commissioner.

"*Yours,* sir! Here is your written order!"

He laid the form on the desk and drew back, staring from face to face, the most dismayed and astounded man in New York City. John Burke waved to him to go. He went.

The commissioner glanced at his own signature, dropped into his chair, and buried his face in his hands. Stopford stared in stupefaction at Roscoe.

"This is black magic!" he whispered.

Roscoe nodded.

"Head Centre scores a point," he replied.

He rested his hand on the bowed shoulders of the seated man.

"Don't worry, Mr. Burke," he said. "*You* are not to blame. One day we shall know how it was done. If Head Centre has scored a point, I think he's taken a big chance: I think *I* have scored a point, too."

"What do you mean, Roscoe?" Father Pat asked in a hushed voice, his glance upon his stricken brother.

"I think I know who Mr. Gaston Pascal really is."

"Who?" Stopford demanded eagerly.

"Unless I am greatly mistaken," Roscoe replied, "M. Pascal is *Head Centre!*"

CHAPTER X

The Page Sutton Siege

§ I

"I THINK what really wakened me," said June Sutton, "was a queer sort of sound that seemed to be very near."

"What did you do?" Drake Roscoe asked.

"I lay quite still for a while," the girl replied. "You see, I was in a dreadful state of nerves because of the attempt on Daddy only a few days before——"

"This, of which you're telling me, happened last Tuesday night?"

"Yes."

"Please go on."

"Then it occurred to me that there was something moving under the pillow! Just as I got this idea, and stifled a scream—I wanted to scream badly!—I felt a tickling sensation on my neck. I sat up. And some *thing* —I can't even guess what—dropped on to the sheets!"

"Then you *did* scream?"

"No, wonderful to relate, I didn't! I couldn't! I switched on the lamp beside my bed and looked around. There was nothing to be seen. I was trembling all over. But I told myself it had been a nightmare. At that moment I heard a faint sound, from under the pillow again! I shot out of bed like a hare!"

"What was the time?" Roscoe asked quietly.

"I noticed particularly. It was one o'clock."

"Your room faces the tennis lawn?"

"Yes."

"Were the dogs quiet?"

"Absolutely."

"Please go on."

"For quite a long while I hadn't the courage to move the pillow. Then, at last, I did move it . . . and now I came to the extraordinary thing, Commander Roscoe. I hope you'll understand why I told nobody—but why I have told you to-night. There was a wooden reel, fixed with a piece of wire, under my pillow!"

Drake Roscoe stared blankly; then:

"Cotton or silk on it?" he jerked.

"Nothing!"

"Your windows were open?"

"Yes, wide open."

"I still don't understand why you didn't report this to your father."

"I will explain," said June Sutton. "I suddenly got an idea that there was someone outside my door. I ran and opened it. The passage was dark. I could see no one. I turned up the lights and ran along to Mrs. Dean's room. I wakened her. We went back together."

"What did you tell her?"

"I just said I thought somebody was in my room."

"How long were you away?"

"Two or three minutes at most."

"What then?"

"We came back . . . and I was glad I had said so little. The reel was gone!"

Drake Roscoe did not speak for a moment; then:

"You were convinced you had been dreaming?" he suggested.

"No," the girl returned, "I knew I hadn't! But what could I say?"

"Nothing," he agreed. "Did you go to bed again?"

"Yes! But I never closed my eyes until daylight!"

"Quite natural," said Roscoe dryly.

"There's something else," the girl went on hesitantly, "although I don't really know if it's got anything to do with the matter."

"Better tell me all the same."

"Well, I have met a queer-looking man around the neighbourhood more than once. On Wednesday I'm almost sure I saw him watching Molly over the hedge."

"Eh!" snapped Roscoe. "Describe him."

June laughed uneasily.

"I didn't say a word to Molly," she explained, "and he never appears when she is with me. But—he's queerly like Napoleon!"

Roscoe suppressed some violent epithet.

"When did you last notice this man?" he asked quietly.

"Yesterday afternoon. We passed him in the car on our way to golf."

"Near here?"

"On the corner."

"Did Miss O'Hay see him?"

"No." June hesitated, and then: "Don't tell Daddy if you can avoid it," she pleaded. "He's got worry enough. But I had made up my mind to tell you."

§ II

Dusk was creeping over the home of Page Sutton.

Dr. Stopford looked from the window at a delicate landscape in silver and green.

Beyond the smooth lawn with its Old World sundial was the shrubbery from which trees upstarted like watchful sentinels, marking the boundary of the grounds. Between them he could see the waters of the Sound. Faint bird notes were audible, together with the persistent pulsing of a motorboat. A peaceful summer evening, but to the eye of the man staring from the window every shadow suggested a menace; for the home of Page Sutton was within the Zones—those mysterious Zones, controlled by the creature merely known as "Head Centre."

The door opened and Drake Roscoe came in.

"Yes, Stopford," said he, and joined his friend at the window. "Appearances are often deceptive."

Page Sutton stood up from a chair at the shadowy end of the long room. "Do you think I was wise to send for you, Commander Roscoe?" he asked. "And do you think you were wise to come?"

Drake Roscoe swung around and stood squarely braced in that odd manner which identifies one who has followed the sea. His clear, wide-open gray eyes sought the speaker in the shadows.

"Mr. Sutton," he replied, "I am indebted to you for the chance. Long months ago I blundered on to a conspiracy bigger than any in the records of crime. I blundered on to the existence of the organization called the Zones. Here, to-night, I say frankly, I know no

more about the Zones, or very little, and about the man who controls them, than I did at the beginning of my job."

"Personally," Stopford murmured, taking out a cigarette and tapping it reflectively on the nail of his left thumb, "I know less. But they made me miss my ship, and I'm countin' on the sack. That's that!"

The fourth occupant of the room, a heavily built, dark-featured man, got out of a lounge chair in which he had been lying, and taking a match from a stand, relighted some three inches of cigar which he held grimly between his teeth.

"Commander," he said, addressing Roscoe, "you are going to learn things here in this house to-night."

Roscoe nodded. Since Ned W. Regan had numbered kings among his clients, the statement was worthy of respect.

"What I can't cope with," Stopford declared, "is how the blazes, considerin' the team up against 'em, these Zone blokes keep their wicket up. You've got about twelve thousand New York police, not to mention the United States Navy an' Army. Then there's Regan with platoons and platoons of detectives. Yet—well!—the answer is, search me."

Drake Roscoe began to walk up and down in front of the opened windows as though he paced a steamer's bridge.

"Let's understand one another, Mr. Sutton," said he. "Forgive me if I touch on intimate matters, but I want to get my data clear. Check me if I'm wrong, Regan; but as I see the facts, they are these:

"You, Mr. Sutton, have for some years submitted to

an elaborate scheme of blackmail. I understand that no less a sum than a million dollars has been exacted from you by a certain organization. You lost your wife six months ago. Her death deprived the blackmailer of the hold which he had had upon you. I don't inquire its nature—this does not concern me—but you are now out of the power of this group. Am I right so far?"

Page Sutton nodded but did not speak.

"Very well," Roscoe continued. "Prior to the death of your wife you had been endeavouring to obtain information which would enable you to checkmate these people. Mr. Regan had been secretly working for you. Am I right, Regan?"

"You're right as right," growled the detective; "but don't rub it in that I fell down."

"Since you have ceased payment," Roscoe went on, "there have been attempts to intimidate you. Of one of these"—tapping his breast pocket—"I have details, supplied by Mr. Regan. Two weeks ago you got in touch with a certain man——"

"Two weeks to-day," Regan confirmed. "He came to my office and I brought him right along here."

"This man," Roscoe resumed, "whom you have described, represented himself as an officer of the organization which had victimized Mr. Sutton for years. But finally, and at a price——"

"Twenty thousand dollars!" Regan interjected violently. "I told him not to pay it."

"At a price," Roscoe went on, "he placed in your possession certain details respecting this criminal group."

"I'm here to see 'em!" said Regan.

Page Sutton waved his hand for silence.

"You thought I was a fool the day I came to you, Regan," he said impatiently. "Maybe I was, but I'm no fool now. To-night you shall see what I have in the safe. It was well worth twenty thousand dollars."

"But," said Roscoe, "the informer has disappeared, so that we can't check his information. And certain attempts have been made on your own life. Am I right?"

"You're dead right," Page Sutton agreed.

"It doesn't surprise me a bit," Stopford declared, speaking from the open window. "Roscoe can tell you of a similar case. Whenever a member of this gang tries to do a spot of brokerage on the side, he's blotted out. I'm sorry for the poor bloke who took your twenty thousand bucks, Mr. Sutton. He's probably floatin' peacefully down East River—bloated but immune."

"That's not the point," Roscoe interrupted. "The point is, the value of the information which he supplied is confirmed by the later attempts on this house. Do you agree, Regan?"

"I agree all the time," said the detective.

"You have something in your safe," Roscoe declared, "which, when I see it, may help me to break up the Zones."

"You're going to see it to-night," Page Sutton repeated.

"The next point is," said Regan, standing up, "that Commander Roscoe, who's been hiding, disguised, in New York for the reason that he daren't venture out on the street—you get me? That's how strong they are—is here now in your home. And if the goods he's come

for aren't up to specification he's playing tennis with live bombs."

"Part of the game, Regan," said Roscoe quietly. "You are in pretty deep yourself. If we're on a false scent we shall both have a thin time getting away. One thing is a bit obscure. Having realized that this was a danger area, Mr. Sutton, why have you kept guests in the house?"

"I'll tell you," Page Sutton replied immediately. "I knew they were safe enough, and I thought their presence added to *my* safety. There are only two, anyway. Molly O'Hay, a niece of Deputy Commissioner Burke"—Roscoe exchanged a swift glance with Stopford—"she was at school in Paris with my daughter June. And an old friend of my own, Dr. Cross, a member of *your* trade," turning in Stopford's direction. "They're safe enough. There's nothing to fear."

"Yet you were shot at while you were playing tennis on your own lawn."

Roscoe was the speaker. Page Sutton grimaced unhappily.

"True enough," he admitted: "but *I* was the target!"

"But at night?"

"Well! I should like to meet the man who could enter these grounds! There are six very useful Alsatians at large from dusk onward!"

The door opened, and Christopoulos, Page Sutton's Greek butler, came in. Regan had been on the point of speaking. He checked the words upon his tongue. All four men looked in the direction of the open door, and:

"Yes?" said Sutton. "What is it?"

"Mrs. Dean wishes to know, sir, if Mr. Regan is staying to-night."

"No," Ned Regan answered shortly: "I must get back to town."

"But, my dear Regan!" Roscoe cried—"a bargain is a bargain!"

Regan stared through the growing gloom at the speaker.

"You understand?" Roscoe repeated—"a bargain is a bargain."

"Sure," said the detective slowly: "you have reminded me. Of course. If I'm not putting you out, Sutton, I should like to stay."

"More than welcome," Sutton declared. He turned to the butler who, immobile, stood in the open doorway. "Tell Mrs. Dean that Mr. Regan will be staying."

Christopoulos bowed and went out, closing the door.

"What's the move?" Regan whispered.

"The move is," Roscoe replied, "that I don't trust that man. Follow him. I think you'll find that, having reported to the housekeeper, he'll make straight for a telephone!"

Regan grunted comprehendingly and stood up, when:

"Hello!" cried Stopford, who had remained standing by the open window. "Hello! Hello!"

"What is it?" Page Sutton asked excitedly.

"Who's down there?" Stopford was straining, now, from the window. "Who the devil are you, and what's your game?"

Regan, who had been heading for the door, turned

and ran to the window; Sutton and Roscoe also joined Stopford.

"All out on to the lawn!" said the latter. "Open order. There's somebody lurkin' in the bushes, and he's been listenin' in!"

CHAPTER XI

The Second Tree

§ I

BROADWAY was a wedge of cabs and cars heading from hotels and restaurants toward theatres. Fifth Avenue was nearly as bad. Sixth Avenue, as the most congested artery serving the heart of the city, presented a solid mass of vehicles, since the New York taxi driver will go many miles out of his way for the mere joy of finding himself jammed in this impassable thoroughfare.

A cloudless summer sky glowed as the skies glow above Stromboli or Vesuvius in eruption. From Hoboken on the west, and Brooklyn on the east, down from the Bronx, up from the Battery—New York's millions herded to that inner circle bisected by the White Way which is a nightly setting of the eternal pleasure quest.

Amid it, yet removed from it, aloft and aloof, in a silent room, dark as the chambers of the Great Pyramid, a speck of red light glowed venomously and a voice spoke.

"Report of Group Master 4," said the voice. "Sector 3 A 3. Inside the Page Sutton home: Roscoe and Stopford are remaining the night, also Ned W. Regan. Latter is watching Christopoulos, Greek butler. Group master reports difficulty in obtaining particulars: be-

lieves Christopoulos to be suspicious. Mrs. Dean, housekeeper, has not yet allotted rooms. Timed eight-thirty. Report ends."

Fully a minute passed in silence, then:

"Report of Sector Captain 3 A 3," said a musical voice in the darkness.

"Report to hand," came the reply immediately. "Sector Captain 3 A 3, covering the Sutton home, advises that all attempts on the dogs have failed. Christopoulos, Greek butler, has countered every move. Consignment from chief chemist safely to hand. Suitable tree located, and Group master detached for special duty awaits orders. Failing Commander Roscoe's allocation on water front, Sector captain standing by for instructions. Report ends."

Half a minute of silence, then:

"Connect Zone Officer 2 A," the musical voice directed, "immediately I have completed my present order. Instruct garage controller to despatch his fastest car to the Hotel Plaza. He will be called in the name of Raymond. He will receive further orders from the officer joining him there. Two more cars are to be placed at disposal of H.Q. patrols. Move. Connect Zone Officer 2 A."

Another brief interval, then:

"Zone 2 A," said a soft feminine voice.

That other voice out of the darkness replied:

"Zone Officer 2 A," said the speaker, and now he spoke in French, "you will proceed to the Plaza. A Cadillac will meet you. The chauffeur's name is Raymond. Instruct him to drive you to the Page Sutton country home, which you know. He is to break down

at the gates. You are to obtain hospitality for the night. Use your own discretion. You understand?"

"I understand," the woman's voice replied, a little wearily.

"Good," the other continued. "As you leave the elevator of your apartment a man will meet you. Give him the key; and directly you are in the Page Sutton home, call your own number. This officer will answer you. Further instructions will reach you later. You understand?"

"I understand."

"Await the officer's arrival. He will call you from the lobby. Disconnect."

Three seconds elapsed. The red light glowed on, then:

"H.Q.," said a sing-song voice.

"Instruct Number 3, H.Q. patrol, to proceed to Madame Czerna's apartment on West Fifty-ninth Street. She will hand him the key at his request. He will stand by for her telephone message. He will then stand by for calls from H.Q. Sector captain covering the Sutton home is to report at ten-minute intervals. Reinforce all Division A stations from Division B. All units not engaged under schedules 5 and 9 are to stand by. This is a General Emergency Order."

The red light disappeared. Darkness claimed the room high above the clamour of New York where men and women, boys and girls, hurried in quest of pleasure; where monstrous lights proclaimed the virtues of this chewing gum and that cigarette: where the cares of the day were being forgotten in the excitements of the night.

Above this noisy, careless world relaxed, one grim, relentless, giant intellect remained focussed, poisonously

concentrated: the spider at the heart of a web stretching over all those heedless flies below, and competent at any moment to enmesh them.

§ II

"False alarm," said Ned Regan.

"Not a bit of it!" Stopford cried indignantly. "I said, and I say again, that someone was lurkin' in the bushes, listenin' in on us."

"But not a trace of him"—from Sutton, breathlessly.

"Yet"—Roscoe was the speaker—"Stopford is right. There's a spy amongst us."

"It couldn't have been Christopoulos," said Regan; "he was in the room at the time."

Roscoe glanced sharply at the speaker.

"I didn't suggest Christopoulos," he replied.

"But you distrust him."

"I admit that. He is very clever, but his behaviour isn't normal. Let's have a brief conference; then, I suppose, we must rejoin the ladies. Naturally they know there's something afoot, and must be feeling uneasy."

Through the French windows the search party entered the room. It was now in complete darkness.

"Don't light up for a moment!" Roscoe said.

The four grouped in the darkened room, then:

"Where's your safe, Sutton?" Roscoe asked abruptly.

"The safe in which I have the map?"

"Yes."

"It's in my bedroom, directly above here."

"Ah," Roscoe mused aloud, "is there anyone else in the house who knows or suspects the fact?"

"Not a soul."

"The attempts upon your life are regarded by your daughter and your guests as the actions of some mad communist?"

"Sure. I'm a big employer of labour, Commander, and if it's good enough for some fanatic to plant bombs in the subway, it's good enough for one of 'em to take pot shots at me. That's the story from my guests' point of view."

"The fanatic who planted the bomb in the subway," said Roscoe slowly, "may not have been just the type of anarchist you have in mind. But that's another story, as Kipling would say. There was an attempt quite recently in Boston Harbour to blow up one of the new battleships. There was another attempt to close the Panama Canal. There was a third attempt to assassinate your own friend, Peter Champion. You'll recall this? I associate these crimes, Sutton, with your present peril."

"Good God!" Sutton exclaimed. "If you're right, this thing is bigger than I figured."

"It's miles bigger than anybody figured," Dr. Stopford burst in. "I happen to know it for a cert. This thing called the Zones, whatever it may be, isn't just a family blackmailin' business. It's a whale of a concern."

"It is," said Roscoe grimly. "It's so big that I have been relieved of all other duties, given powers which mean I've got Washington behind me, and am backed by every cent in the United States Treasury. Now you can guess how big it is."

"Sure thing," growled Regan out of the shadows. "I'm open to lay a million dollars, which I don't happen to possess, to a mouldy peanut, that the Zone chief, Head

Centre, knows you're here; that he knows I'm here; and that he knows the map is here!"

"He not only knows," Roscoe interrupted grimly, "but he is personally watching this house!"

"What!" Page Sutton cried.

He stopped abruptly. Someone had rapped on the door.

"Wait!" Roscoe whispered. "I'm going out on to the lawn. Give me time to get clear."

A vague silhouette to the eyes of those who watched, he passed through an open French window and disappeared. Thereupon:

"Come in!" Sutton cried.

The door opened. Against the light in a lobby beyond showed the figure of June Sutton.

"Why! you are all in the dark!" she cried.

"We've been watching the sunset, Miss June," Regan growled. "Switch up the light, Doc."

Stopford made for the switch, but June reached it before him, and the room became brightly illuminated. Molly O'Hay followed her friend in and put her arm round June's waist. The pair made a very charming picture framed in the doorway, the beautiful Irish girl, with her short bronze hair and blush-rose complexion a delightful contrast to June's more dusky, piquant prettiness. It was ruined by the appearance of Dr. Cross. His good-humouredly ugly face was thrust in between the heads of the two girls. He accentuated his resemblance to an ape, and:

"The gorilla with his captives!" said he, and threw his long arms around them both. "I really feel that I'm

exceeding my duty." Then, observing the expressions upon the three faces, "I hope I haven't disturbed a business conference?" he added.

"Not a bit of it, Cross," said Page Sutton heartily; "the conference is over."

"I hope, Mr. Regan," Dr. Cross declared facetiously, "that there will be no shooting to-night. Your presence reassures all of us, however, tremendously. You are staying, I understand?"

"Yes." Regan glanced at him sharply. "I am staying to-night."

"Oh, June! What a wonderful light in the sky!" cried Molly, and drew her friend forward. "I can just see it above the trees. Do let's go out and peep!"

"There's just time, girls," said Sutton. "In another ten minutes we lock up. After that it won't be safe for anybody out of steel armour to move around there. Listen! Can you hear 'em?"

All stood still listening.

From some place at the rear of that big house came the remote but terrifying chorus of the wolf dogs. Molly turned.

"Mr. Sutton," she said—her brogue was delicious—"I've heard about your adventures here from my uncle. I didn't think I should ever live in a besieged fortress. I just love it!"

She laughed gayly, but June's pretty, sensitive face was troubled. As the two girls went out through the open French window, and Dr. Cross followed them:

"In half an hour in my study!" Page Sutton whispered earnestly to Stopford. "Put Roscoe wise when he comes back, and tell Regan."

At which moment, and almost before he had ceased speaking, came a stifled cry from June.

"What's that?"

Her father sprang toward the window.

June was dragging Molly back into the room.

"In the tree!" she said in a stifled voice, and pointed. "In that tall tree—beyond the bushes! I saw something . . . like a huge monkey!"

"You're nervous, June dear," Molly murmured sympathetically. "I saw nothing."

"It's easily settled," said Stopford, his drawling manner gone, a man transfigured.

He leaped past the girls through the open window.

Regan followed, Page Sutton at his heels, when:

"Please, Daddy," cried June, "don't go! I'm terrified."

Sutton halted. Dr. Cross watched two figures retreating in the growing darkness and then, contemplating June, said:

"I'll stay, too. It's a false alarm, anyway."

Stopford was heading across the lawns for an opening in the tall hedge communicating with the drive. Regan, hard and athletic for all his bulk, overtook him at the gap, and side by side they doubled out on to the gravelled sweep.

Not a soul was in sight about the grounds; but just as they came out in view of the gates, the Alsatians in their kennels at the rear of the house set up a wolfish howling—uncanny, unnerving, in the dusk, with that menace hanging over them.

They were almost come to the gates when Regan checked, pulled up; so did Stopford. A dimly seen figure

was just entering! He raised his hand, waving them back.

"Good God! It's Roscoe!"

"About turn!" said Stopford.

They turned around, breathless, and began slowly to walk back. Roscoe overtook them by the hedge gap. He burst in between the pair, taking an arm of each.

"Listen!" he said; "there's a car coming along the road. Do you hear it? Something tells me that it's coming here."

"What of it?" Regan growled. "I want to know what's up that tree. I don't care two hoots about the car."

"But I do!" Roscoe replied. "And if it'll relieve your mind, *I* was up the tree!"

"What!" Stopford cried.

"Sailors can climb, you know." Roscoe laughed. "I had reasons for climbing that tree. Do you know what I think?"

"No," said Regan bluntly; "I'm damned if I do."

"I think the patrol by the wolf dogs and Sutton's other precautions have made it impossible for the Zones to operate from inside the grounds."

"Well?"

"They have found a way of operating from outside. To-night we shall know what it is!"

§ III

A red light glowed in the darkness of a silent room.

"H.Q.," said a sing-song voice. "Report of Zone

Officer 2 A just to hand, via H.Q. patrol standing by in her apartment. She has carried out instructions. Group master in charge of car ran into a hedge and has jammed the steering gear. Page Sutton has offered the officer accommodation for the night. She has met acquaintances among the party. Has been allotted a room facing the Sound. Drake Roscoe is located at the back. Awaiting instructions in Page Sutton home. Timed 9:30. Report ends."

Out of the darkness, uncanny, because no speaker was visible, came the cultured, modulated voice of Head Centre. One listening closely might have noticed the accentuation of certain vowels, and guessed, perhaps wrongly, the nationality of the speaker.

"Report," directed the musical voice, "of H.Q. patrol covering Zone Officer 2 A."

"Report to hand. Patrol saw the wrecked car, and waited until baggage was moved into the house. Group master in charge, with the Page Sutton chauffeur, drove in one of the Sutton cars to nearest garage for mechanics. Report ends."

There was silence for thirty seconds, then:

"Report of Group master in Sutton home," came a crisp order.

"No report to hand."

"Report of Sector captain covering."

"To hand. The tree located for to-night's operation was climbed at 9:05 by Commander Roscoe. No evidence was there. Consignment from chief chemist safe. One other tree is available, but less suitable. Sector captain awaits instructions. This report by X Radio. Report ends."

A minute elapsed. There was nothing in the darkness of the room to indicate that a living creature occupied it. Steadily the red light glowed. Then:

"Call Zone Officer 2 A," the commanding voice directed, "and connect the officer directly with me. Relieve H.Q. patrol of his duties at Madame Czerna's apartment and instruct him to report back at once. Recall patrol who covered Zone Officer 2 A. Instruct Sector captain in charge outside the Page Sutton home to operate from the second tree mentioned in his report, but to await direct orders. Despatch three firing groups from Division B to cover lines of approach to the house. Instruct Divisional Chief B to clear the Zones against the event of withdrawal. Detail the patrol relieved of duty in Madame Czerna's apartment to X Radio. He is to stand by until further orders. Have the Rolls two-seater in readiness at Exit Seven. Move."

The red light went out.

CHAPTER XII

The Map

§ I

"THE position is this," said Drake Roscoe. "We know that some super criminal has got the City of New York mapped out in Zones. We don't know what these Zones are and we don't know their centre. We don't know if the New York Zones impinge on others and so on, covering the whole of the United States."

Sutton laughed hoarsely.

"Good God!" he exclaimed.

"I say seriously," Roscoe assured him, "that the efficiency of the Zones, which I have experienced, reasonably suggests such a development. Let's hope I'm wrong. At the moment we are concerned with New York City."

"But we're not in New York City," Stopford interpolated.

"I agree," said Roscoe quietly. "But not knowing how far the City Zones extend, we may quite possibly, even here, be in an outside City Zone."

"You're right!" cried Page Sutton. "The map proves it!"

"One moment." Roscoe stood up. "Open the door, Regan."

Ned Regan crossed to the study door and threw it open. The corridor outside was empty.

"Leave it that way," said Roscoe. "You're sure"—turning to the host—"we can't be overheard here?"

"Not with the windows shut."

"Good!" Roscoe nodded. "As for your household: Your guest, Dr. Cross? You have chatted with him, Stopford?"

"I certainly have," Stopford replied. "He's sound enough. I mean he knows medicine in the Harvard sense. I'm not suggestin' for a moment"—he removed his monocle and burnished it carefully—"I'm not suggestin' for one moment that he'd ever have qualified at Oxford!"

Ned Regan laughed loudly.

"Good for Oxford!" said his host. "But the point is, you have no doubts whatever of Cross. They'd be ridiculous of course, anyway."

"Not a spot of doubt," Stopford returned. "He's a practisin' sawbones, take my word for it. He's extraordinarily sound on tropical medicine."

"Good!" said Roscoe crisply. "We now come to Christopoulos, your butler, Mr. Sutton."

"Yes," said Sutton; "what's wrong with him?"

"Well——"

Roscoe paused. A shadow was thrown into the room. There came a rap upon the opened door, and Christopoulos entered. His pale, immobile features were expressionless, as:

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "But when you are free, Madame Czerna would like a word with you."

"Oh?" Page Sutton replied. "I'm very busy at the

moment, Christopoulos. Is there anything I can do for her in the meantime?"

"Possibly, sir. The lady is very shaken, as you know, and as she understands that dogs roam the lawns all night, she has asked Mrs. Dean if it would be possible for her to exchange rooms with Commander Roscoe, who sleeps at the rear of the house. She sends her apologies——"

"Delighted," Roscoe burst in. "No trouble, is it, Sutton?"

"None whatever. Tell Mrs. Dean to arrange it, Christopoulos."

Christopoulos bowed, and went out, closing the door.

"Open that door again, Regan," Roscoe directed.

Regan nodded, crossed, and opened the door, glancing out into the corridor. He returned to his chair.

"Our new guest," Roscoe went on, "Madame Czerna, is known to myself, to Miss O'Hay, and also to my friend, Dr. Stopford. That so, Stoppy?"

"Yes," Stopford returned, with obvious embarrassment. "I know her, of course."

"So do I," Roscoe murmured. "She's a pretty woman and a charming woman. But why is she here to-night?"

"Her car crashed. She was too shaken to proceed to her destination. Your question is fatuous in a high degree."

"Do you think so?" Roscoe returned.

"No, I don't!" Stopford admitted, and, standing up, began to pace about the room. "But the whole thing is astoundin'ly difficult."

"See here," said Page Sutton, "I'm a party whose life is threatened; let me in on this. My daughter's friend,

Molly O'Hay, happens to know this lady who has been thrown on our hospitality to-night. I understand that Dr. Stopford knows her also. But, in the circumstances, if there's anything queer about her, bring me up level with what you know. This isn't the time for silence."

"I agree," said Roscoe quietly. "I think my friend agrees, too."

"I've got no choice," Stopford declared. "Madame Czerna, whom I have known a long time, has acquired, in some way, certain information respectin' this Zone gang. I don't believe for a moment that she's crooked; but I admit that I think she knows somethin'."

"Brave lad!" murmured Roscoe. "It's a great thing to be born a sportsman. We have then, two queries, Mr. Sutton." He turned to their host. "Your butler, whom, frankly, I distrust, and your new guest, Madame Czerna."

Thereupon:

"I've got something to say," growled Ned Regan. "Maybe I should have said it sooner, but I'll say it now."

"Let's have it!" said Page Sutton.

"Good enough!" Regan returned. "Ring for Christopoulos."

A rather awkward silence, created by the detective's truculent manner, was ended by the entrance of the butler.

"You wanted me, sir?"

"Shut the door!" Ned Regan ordered.

Christopoulos closed the door.

"You know Commander Drake Roscoe," Regan went on. "This is Dr. Stopford. And now, gentlemen, I want

you to meet one of the best men in my bureau—Robert Bach! I planted him here as your butler, Sutton, when you first gave me the case."

He turned to Drake Roscoe who, dumbfounded, was watching Christopoulos.

"Your suspicions were natural," he admitted. "Only a clever man would have noticed the things you have noticed, Commander. But this is the explanation! Anything new to report, Bach?"

"Good Lord!" Page Sutton whispered; and Dr. Stopford busily burnished his monocle.

"Several things, Mr. Regan," Bach replied. "But not the one I know you're waiting for. In the first place, there's up to a dozen men covering the house——"

"Good heavens!" Page Sutton exclaimed, and started up from his seat.

"In the second place," Bach went on, "at least two of the gang are inside! One of the staff is a spy, but hang me if I can place him! Third point, someone tried again to get at the dogs to-night."

There came an interruption, a sound of light running footsteps, and Molly O'Hay burst unceremoniously into the room.

"Oh, Mr. Sutton!" she cried, "I looked out of June's window a moment ago, and I saw someone race across the lawn to the shrubbery and disappear! I thought you ought to know!"

Page Sutton turned excitedly to Bach.

"Are the gates locked?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," was the reply in the manner again of a well-trained butler.

"Warn everybody. Fasten up, and loose the dogs! Something tells me we're up against a night attack!"

§ II

"Look here, Roscoe," said Stopford, "owin' to my quixotic interest in your blameless young life, I've missed my ship, been shot at by some bloke who controls somethin' vaguely called the 'Zones,' and now find myself incarcerated in an astonishin' mansion belongin' to an amiable millionaire. I gather that our Zone pals are congregatin' in the dark. I assume that one couldn't throw a stone from any window without hittin' a couple of Zones. Splendid! But what are we doin' here and what are we goin' to get out of it?"

The man addressed, a dim shadow over by the closed door, did not immediately answer. Stopford set the monocle in place before one blue eye where it instantly and miraculously became attached. Then:

"Here's the answer, old lad," came the reply. "The house of Page Sutton, in which we are, is at present the focus of all the forces of Head Centre—of all the Zones."

"Cheery ho!"

Roscoe advanced into the failing light which struggled through the window. Three inches shorter than Stopford, but sturdy and agile as an acrobat, his wide-open gray eyes were set unfalteringly upon the face of his friend. When Commander Drake Roscoe smiled his tanned features looked like those of a healthy schoolboy. But he was not smiling.

"Page Sutton has locked in his safe upstairs some-

thing which cost him twenty thousand dollars but which, if genuine, is worth ten times the price. That's why we're here."

"Absolutely," Stopford murmured. "Painfully, distressin'ly obvious. But I rather gather, old scout, that that's also why *they* are here—I mean the blokes who've tried to shoot Page Sutton. Flocks of wolf dogs will shortly be loose on this pleasant property. There are prison-like shutters to all windows; a depressin' atmosphere——"

"Stoppy," Roscoe interrupted, "we're in for a wild night! I'm sorry, because there are women in the house——"

"Particularly Molly O'Hay."

"Maybe! But there are others!"

Stopford groaned.

"Extraordinary thing, Madame Czerna's turning up here," he muttered. "Certainly the car broke down—but why outside this blighted house?—and why tonight?"

"There's just time to tell you something else," Roscoe went on quickly. "Sutton's daughter, June, was the victim of a queer attempt some few nights back."

"June Sutton! What's she got to do with it?"

"I don't know. But shut up. Listen. She was in the first place wakened. Next, she detected a faint sound that seemed to come from under the pillow. Finally, something—she doesn't know what—ran across the bed. Under the pillow she found a small wooden reel, of the sort used for silk or cotton, fixed there by a piece of twisted wire."

"You're alarmin' me."

"It alarmed *her!* She bolted out and along to the housekeeper, Mrs. Dean. They came back together."

"Find anything?"

"Not anything living. Of course the window was wide open."

Stopford stared vaguely into the darkness masking the speaker; then:

"Not a glimmer," he declared. "Means precisely nothin' to me."

"No," Roscoe murmured. "I admit it's obscure. But it may turn out to mean a devil of a lot to me."

§ III

In a room far distant from the Page Sutton country home, high in the centre of New York, a dark room, its darkness masking the presence of a more formidable creature than the United States had hitherto entertained, a red light glowed.

"H.Q.," said a voice. "Report of Zone Officer 2 A. Commander Roscoe had been allotted a room at the rear of the Page Sutton home. Zone Officer 2 A requested Page Sutton to arrange an exchange as the barking of dogs always disturbs her. Transfer is being made. Roscoe will now face the lawn. Timed ten o'clock. Report ends."

"Report of Group master inside the Sutton home."

"Report to hand. He experiences great difficulty in making his report owing to the activity of Christopoulos, Greek butler, and of Ned W. Regan. Directly Mrs. Dean, housekeeper, has rearranged the room facing Sound to be occupied by Commander Roscoe, Group

master will make the connection. The delay is dangerous, as, once the dogs are out, making of connection becomes impossible. Report ends."

"Report of Sector captain covering the house."

"Report to hand. Everything is in readiness. Standing by for instructions. Report ends."

There was an interval of fully a minute; then:

"Take charge of H.Q.," came the order. "File all reports. Advise garage controller I shall leave by Exit Seven in five minutes."

The red light went out.

§ IV

"We're in for a state of siege," said Page Sutton. His habitually fresh-coloured face was pale. "This house is surrounded, and there are spies inside. What they want is in that safe!" He pointed. "It's a map of the New York City Zones!"

Drake Roscoe, composed, but his gray eyes very bright, stared at the speaker across the big cozy study.

"You may be right, Sutton," said he. "You may be wrong. The gates are locked; the doors are barred: in a few minutes the dogs will be loose in the grounds. We want to be sure of the people inside. You agree, Regan?"

Ned W. Regan heaved himself out of a long rest-chair. His apparently slothful bulk had deceived to his cost many a man who had looked to find in America's most famous private detective something more obviously alert.

"Whoever's inside from the other camp," said he, "doesn't get out! Because to-night we're going through

this household with a fine-tooth comb! First let's have a view of your twenty-thousand-dollar map!"

"One moment," Drake Roscoe interrupted. "I have my own ideas about the map, and I have my own ideas about how this job should be conducted. There's one of your guests suspect, Sutton: Madame Czerna——"

"Phew!"

Dr. Stopford was the interrupter. Standing up, he began to pace the carpet, busily burnishing his monocle as he walked. Roscoe looked at him hard.

"The lady is a particular friend of yours, Stoppy, I know," he went on. "But you can't deny that she had something to do with your missing your ship?"

Stopford shrugged but didn't speak. When the senior surgeon of the R.M.S. *Ruritania* misses his ship, a new senior surgeon is liable to be appointed at Liverpool.

"Very well," said Roscoe. "She came uninvited. She has now effected a change of rooms. The result is that I am located at the front of the house instead of at the back. This gives me an idea which may lead to the discovery of the spy among your domestic staff, Sutton. Which of your servants ordinarily has access to the bedrooms?"

Page Sutton considered the question for a moment; then:

"Mrs. Dean, my housekeeper," he replied slowly; "two maids; and, of course, the butler on occasions."

"The butler being Bach, an agent of Regan's," Roscoe replied, "we can leave him out. No other manservant?"

Page Sutton shook his head.

"No—except Armitage, my own man. He's in and

out of my quarters, of course, but he has no actual business in any other bedroom."

"Ah!" Roscoe muttered. "How long has Armitage been with you?"

"Nearly a year. He's right as right. Shall I send for him?"

"On no account."

"Eh!" Regan grunted.

"I have reasons for wishing," Roscoe declared, "that no one in this house should be hampered to-night!"

"Good Lord!" Stopford exclaimed. "Why not serve 'em out with bombs!"

All three men stared with amazement at the commander. But he merely smiled.

"I'm gradually learning my job," he explained. "It's no good trying to tackle the Zone gang on the principle of a bull at a gate. And now, Sutton—the map."

Amid complete silence, Page Sutton unlocked the safe. Taking out a flat leather case, he unlocked this in turn. All bent over the table eagerly, as a strange map of New York City was spread flat under the lamp.

"It cost twenty thousand dollars," said their host, "and maybe the life of the man who sold it to me. But it's worth more."

No one spoke. All were studying this extraordinary map—over which had been drawn a series of circles, centring on a district a little north of Wall Street. The outermost circle touched the Bronx. The bottom of this circle was not shown on the map. It presumably covered a considerable area of the Atlantic. The belts or Zones were variously coloured and gave the thing a most peculiar appearance. These Zones were divided up into

oddly shaped sectors; and each sector bore a number. At last:

"It shouldn't be a difficult matter," said Drake Roscoe, "to trace this point." He rested a pencil on the centre of the Zones. "That's where the spider lives—in the heart of the web."

"It all turns on two things," Regan rejoined. "First, is the map genuine in construction? Second, not so important as first, is it centred right?"

"You are suggesting," said Page Sutton, "that it's a fake?"

"It certainly might be," Roscoe admitted soberly, whilst Stopford, using his monocle as a magnifying glass, bent over it peering curiously.

"If it were authentic," Roscoe went on, "with the powers at our command it would be merely a question of time to round up the entire Zone organization! You will note, Sutton, that, according to this map, you are in a Sector marked X, and in what I take to be the third Zone."

"I've noted it!" Sutton returned grimly.

"But what I can't cope with," Stopford declared, "is all the sea which comes into this thing. It leaves out such a lot of New York and takes in so much bally ocean. Hullo!"

Abruptly he ceased.

There came a wild snarling from the grounds below; a concerted savage chorus—the song of a wolf pack.

"Dogs are out!" said Roscoe.

Even as he spoke a more dreadful sound rose, eerie, on the night . . . The sobbing shriek of a man at grips with death!

"Good God!"

Stopford sprang and threw open a window.

The snarling became concentrated, horribly, eloquently muffled. A second wild shriek rose, and died away. There was the sound of a shot . . . a savage howl . . . renewed snarling and worrying.

Somewhere a woman screamed.

Sutton and Regan had started for the door, when:

"Lock the map in the safe," Roscoe snapped.

Sutton turned back and obeyed. He was deadly pale. His hands shook. Stopford was craning from the opened window.

"Some poor devil was out there," he said in a hushed voice, and turned. "It's too late, I think, but for God's sake call the dogs off!"

CHAPTER XIII

Group Master 4

§ I

DOWNSTAIRS, in the big, square room known as the Persian lobby because of its decoration scheme, the other members of the household were panic-stricken.

Stopford reached the stairfoot first, Regan close behind him. Roscoe and Page Sutton could be seen above, running along the oaken gallery with its drapings of rare carpets. Dr. Cross, June Sutton's friend, was standing by a Victrola, a disk in his hand. He had clearly been interrupted in the act of placing it on the instrument.

Heavy draperies concealed the windows—and the massive shutters which protected them, inside. The big, double doors, opening on the lawn, were also draped.

Her back to these draperies, as if, even at such a moment, she could find composure to realize that they formed an ideal setting for her gem-like beauty, Madame Czerna stood, looking toward the stairs.

Slender, alluring, daringly but exquisitely gowned, the unbidden guest faced Stopford. Under the multi-coloured lights of a Persian mosque lamp her short, coppery hair glowed fierily. She was of a type which excites controversy. Seen as she appeared now, few would have denied that she was lovely.

In a deep recess below the newel post, June Sutton shrank, fearful. It was she whose cry had been heard in the study above. Molly O'Hay, her arm thrown protectingly about her friend, looked up, a challenge in her widely opened eyes. If the occasion had been less tragic, one might have admired the picture of the two girls, artlessly posed in a group of appealing beauty; both alarmed, but the Irish rose showing all her thorns in defence of the more delicate lily.

Stopford raced for the door. An observer must have noted a subtle change in the debonair ship's doctor. His monocle retained its place; but the fatuous good humour was fled in favour of a cold determination.

Madame Czerna barred his way with outstretched arms.

"You must not go out there!" she said, her French accent intensified by her passionate sincerity. "Those beasts will tear you to pieces!"

He checked. There was a swift exchange of glances. And—whatever or whoever Madame Czerna might be—Stopford knew a hot, wild gladness because of that which he read in those beautiful frightened eyes.

Regan came up with him.

"Open that door—quick!" he said.

"Stop!"

Page Sutton, pale but composed, was the speaker. June struggled to her feet and ran to her father.

"Don't go out there!" she pleaded. "Please don't let anybody go out!"

Molly drifted, naturally, to Roscoe.

"Someone must call the dogs off," she whispered. "Someone they're used to."

"Myself, Miss," said a calm voice.

Molly turned.

Christopoulos stood at her elbow. Regan, thrusting past Madame Czerna, had drawn the heavy curtains aside and was tugging at the door bolts, when:

"One moment, sir!" Christopoulos cried.

Regan paused and looked around.

Bach, his most trusted agent, almost took the master sleuth off his guard in the presence of all the guests.

"Well, Ba——" He checked himself in time. "Well, by all that's holy, what have you got to say?"

"This, sir: the dogs are used to me. For anyone—anyone—to go among them now would mean to be torn to pieces. They are used to my whistle. I will go out by another door and try to call them off. If I succeed, I will lock them in the yard. Then we can venture into the shrubbery."

"Going alone?" Regan growled.

"It would be better, sir."

There was a moment of magnetic silence; then:

"You're right," said Roscoe. "But I'll go too and stand by with a gun! Those dogs have smelled blood!"

Molly O'Hay met his glance for a moment. Then the commander and the butler-detective turned and went out by a door on the left of the stair. Regan grunted, glanced at Madame Czerna and Stopford, and then went out after them.

"Everybody must try to be calm," said Stopford. "We shall want lights; so will someone who knows the house please find them." He turned to Page Sutton. "It might be as well, sir, if we were all armed."

"Good!" his host returned. The doctor's calm man-

ner had acted as a sedative. "I should be obliged if the ladies would go upstairs to the music room. Cross, you know where the firearms are kept. Take this key and bring us four pistols and a packet of shells. Armitage will be here any minute and can join us."

Dr. Cross took the key and went racing upstairs.

"Go along, June, my love," Sutton continued, his arm around his daughter's shoulders. "Lead the way. It will all turn out right enough."

June and Molly started up the stair. The latter turned.

"Come on, dear!" she called.

Madame Czerna, very slowly, followed.

§ II

In a tree-shadowed hollow a Rolls, all lights out, was drawn up. A man sat at the wheel, his hat so shading his features that, had the lamps been lighted, it must have been difficult to identify him. His fingers rested upon an instrument not usually included in the equipment of even so luxurious an automobile as this.

"*Tick—Tick! Ticker—Ticker—Tick—Tick!*" he telegraphed.

And presently came the Morse message:

"Division A A cordon of police being formed around the Zones operating Stop Impossible clear Zone Stop Advise dispersal units concentrated Stop Fear we are out-manœuvred Stop Report ends"

Immediately, the instrument in the car replied:

"Disperse all firing groups Stop Disperse all B reinforcements Stop Instruct Group master charge

motorboat stand by Stop Instruct Group master charge waterplane stand by Stop Disconnect"

Followed some moments of silence. Then the instrument repeated its call:

"Tick—Tick! Ticker—Ticker—Tick—Tick!"

At last the answer came:

"Zone 2 A."

"Your report."

"Roscoe allotted room facing Sound Stop Dogs have attacked perhaps killed someone in grounds Stop Search party setting out Stop Awaiting orders in room Report ends "

Instantly:

"Proceed Roscoe's room," ticked the order. "Lift pillow Return at once and report if reel of silk is there and if silk extends through window Stop Test if tight or loose Stop Don't disturb Stop Hurry Stop Hold the connection Move "

The silence which followed was broken by a sound of running footsteps. They ceased somewhere on the lip of the hollow. There was a muffled colloquy. Then a figure appeared beside the car.

"Well?" said a musical voice—that of the man at the driving wheel.

"Report of Sector Captain 3 A 3 covering Page Sutton home. Group Master 4, Sector 3 A 3, inside the Sutton home, was attacked by the dogs while adjusting connection. He used his pistol. The house is alarmed. Group master believed to be dead."

"Had he made the connection?"

"According to outside report—yes."

"Stand by for instructions."

The figure disappeared into darkness. The instrument in the car began to tick out a message:

"Zone 2 A Reel is there Stop Silk stretched tightly Stop Cannot stay in room longer Report ends"

"Stand by from midnight. Disconnect."

Silence fell in the hollow where the lonely darkened Rolls lay hidden.

§ III

"You're taking risks!" growled Ned Regan.

"I'm used to 'em!" was Roscoe's reply. "We're all in dinner kit and I'm wearing a soft-brimmed hat."

Remote, behind the house, uprose the mingled protests of the wolfhounds, kennelled by the daring cunning of Bach. He had rejoined them at this very moment. His left hand was swathed in bandages.

"All right, Doctor!" he said, catching Stopford's reproachful glance. "Those dogs are clean enough. I ought to know. I look after them."

"I've washed the wound," Dr. Cross interrupted. "I happened to be first in on the job, Stopford. It's superficial, and I used plenty of iodine."

"I'd like it cauterized."

"I take you on that, Doctor!" said Bach. "But let's get our job done first."

He was keen as mustard. Ned Regan glanced back at him.

"You'll go far, my sport," said he, "if you live."

Already he had the bolts drawn, and the party of seven—for Wilson, the chauffeur, had reinforced the group—poured out on to the lawn. Molly O'Hay

watched from the balcony. Particularly, she was watching Roscoe.

"Spread out!" said he, "there may be shooting."

They fanned out, then converged on the shrubbery. The night was still as a desert. Once under cover they came together by the spot where the victim of the dogs lay. Stopford actually found him first.

A ray from a torch told the truth.

"Good God!" whispered Page Sutton—"Armitage!"

"Lights out!" snapped Roscoe.

The search party became plunged in darkness.

"Wilson"—Roscoe had automatically taken command—"grab his head."

"I'll help," said Ned Regan. "Somebody hoof along and make sure the women aren't around."

"Better still"—the hushed voice was that of Dr. Cross—"open the summer ballroom, Sutton. If you haven't the key, run and get it. We can leave him there. It's unpleasant taking him into the house."

Five minutes later, a ghastly thing lay under a sheet in the long, low outbuilding which formed a sort of bastard wing to the Page Sutton home. Ignoring protests, Roscoe searched the body. He seemed to be dissatisfied.

"All in again," he directed tersely. "Then loose the dogs. Can you risk it, Bach?"

"Sure," was the confident reply.

"After which," said Stopford, looking severely at his *confrère,* Dr. Cross, "I should like to take a peep at the wound, Bach."

Back in the house, Roscoe headed straight for the room which had been occupied by the dead man. Among

Armitage's scanty possessions he found what he had looked for. Stopford was at his elbow. Roscoe held up his find.

"We know what the badge of a 'Zone officer' looks like," he said. "I have one in my collection. This, I take it, is the badge of a lesser official. But we're sure, now, that Armitage belonged to the Zones."

The thing was attached to a safety clasp, by which it might be fixed to the owner's garment. It was enamel, coloured blue and white; three parts blue and one part white. Below was a tiny "G" executed in small diamonds.

"Not such a lavish display of brilliants as in the badge of the Zone officer, you'll note," Roscoe commented. "This poor devil must have corresponded to something like a sergeant-major."

"He earned his pay," said Stopford solemnly.

"I wonder if he did?"

"What d'you mean?"

"We shall know later," was the cryptic reply.

As they made their way downstairs:

"Shouldn't Headquarters be informed?" Stopford asked.

"Headquarters," Roscoe answered, "is busy enough. There are no less than four hundred and fifty men covering this section at the present moment!"

It was not a genial atmosphere which prevailed when, presently, the house party came together again. Any pretence of gayety was palpably out of place. Furthermore, all realized, intimately, the power of the menace which overhung that home. The wolf dogs, newly released, were making the night hideous with their howling.

"We must forgive them," said Page Sutton, aside to Roscoe. "God knows they did their job to-night. Even now, I find it hard to believe that Armitage was just a spy."

"If you realized the genius behind the Zones," Roscoe answered, "you wouldn't find it hard at all."

He was watching Molly O'Hay as he spoke, and she, under cover, was watching the commander, although her conversation was divided between Ned Regan and Dr. Cross. Presently, however, the two came together, as was inevitable since each was interested in the other.

"You know," said Molly—her brogue was most alluring—"there's something so reminding about your eyes! It's not blarney, Commander: I'm honest. I seem to have seen those eyes before!"

Roscoe glanced aside at Stopford. But Stopford was most engrossed with Madame Czerna. He wondered, as often he had had occasion to wonder, about the strange gift which belongs to women; a gift which is not intellectual, cultivated, but which is seemingly inherent. Molly O'Hay had met him before, once only. For the first time in his open, active life, he had been disguised, and wonderfully disguised—by Ned Regan. Yet she recognized his eyes!

"Do you remember a party at the apartment of your uncle, Father Burke?" he asked. "There was rather a strange man there. I forget his name; but he is a friend of Madame Czerna's——"

"A man who looked like Napoleon!"

Roscoe nodded. He had good reason to believe that the man who "looked like Napoleon" was Head Centre!

"There was another queer bird," he went on, "so my

friend, Stopford, tells me: a dago dancer called, I think, Ramón de Sa."

Molly shook her head.

"I don't remember that one," she said.

And Roscoe wondered anew. For as "Ramón de Sa" he had attended the party; and it was the eyes of the man she had forgotten which were so similar to the eyes of the man she was unlikely to forget!

There was a certain reluctance to break up the party. Nobody expected to sleep well. But when, at last, all the indications pointed to dispersal, Madame Czerna, who had been fencing with Stopford, grew suddenly serious. Her charming face quite altered. It was as though the weight of troubled years had suddenly been imposed upon her. Glancing aside to where Roscoe was seated:

"I think we must all soon go to bed," she said. Dr. Stopford thought that her accent was exquisite. "I want to ask you so queer a thing. I don't know how to say it."

"Oh, persevere," he urged. "I'm astonishin'ly broad-minded."

"I am serious," she replied. "I am in the room that should have been the room of your friend—Commander Roscoe."

"Don't worry. He's quite happy."

"You do not understand." Now he was watching her closely. "The thing I have to ask is this—but you must protect me if he says 'Who told you?'—Do not let him sleep in that room to-night!"

Before Stopford had recovered from the surprise occasioned by this remark, Madame had bidden everybody good-night, had made her apologies charmingly,

explaining how the car accident had shaken her, and had started up the stair.

As she crossed the carpet-draped gallery, she glanced back, raised her finger to her lips, and pointed to Roscoe.

Out in the grounds, the wolf dogs had started howling again.

CHAPTER XIV

Night Attack

§ I

It was an hour later.

"The dogs are quiet enough now," said Stopford.

"Yes," Roscoe replied, speaking in the same low tones. "If I am right in my theory, the thing that is going to happen is *above* the dogs."

"Above the dogs?" Stopford echoed. "Don't follow. And what d'you mean when you say 'the thing that's goin' to happen'?"

"I should have said 'that *may* happen.' The death of Armitage perhaps stalled 'em."

"Poor devil! D'you mean you've got a notion what he was up to out there?"

"Yes. Speak softly. Regan and Bach are covering this room, but I don't know who else may be doing the same."

Stopford moved nearer to the open window, but:

"Easy!" Roscoe warned. "Not too near! Keep back! I'm supposed to be in bed, and you're supposed to be in your own room. I think we've blinded the enemy, but I'm not sure."

Stopford, silent in bath slippers, came back. He had

glimpsed the long, sloping lawn, its nearer sward ebony in the house shadow, its outer edge bathed in moonlight, where, beyond the sundial, tall trees started up from the shrubbery like watchful sentinels. He had had a momentary sight of the long, low outbuilding, where something lay which was unpleasant to remember.

"Has the truth about Page Sutton's map dawned upon you?" Roscoe said softly.

"No. D'you think it's a fake?"

"I'm sure of it! And I think I know why it was handed over to Sutton."

"Why?"

"Well, of course I may be wrong. But Regan thinks that Sutton's life is in danger."

"It rather looks like it!"

"It was meant to look like it, Stopford! But Page Sutton actually isn't in a bit of danger. The danger is to me!"

"But——"

He ceased abruptly.

Heralded by one warning bark, the whole wolf-dog pack came sweeping around an angle of the house and out headlong on to the lawn below the window.

"Gad!"

"Ssh! Silence!"

The dogs plunged into the shrubbery, some uttering short angry barks, others snarling savagely. Their heavy bodies created a constant lashing sound amongst the undergrowth. They could be heard leaping—and falling back; leaping—and falling back.

"Someone on the other side of the hedge!" Stopford whispered.

"Perhaps. Listen."

The uproar prevailed for fully five minutes. Then, as if obeying definite, mysterious canine orders, the pack broke out of cover and went racing from moonlight into shadow, around the angle of the house from which they had come.

"False alarm," Stopford murmured.

"I don't think so," said Roscoe. "I think someone has drawn them off on a false scent."

"Eh? You're making me jumpy! Although your window's wide open, there's no chance of anybody gettin' at you, that I can see."

"It would seem so," Roscoe admitted. "Probably you have forgotten that some sort of an outbreak awakened Jane Sutton one night last week?"

Stopford was invisible in the darkness, but Roscoe sensed that he had removed his monocle and was busy burnishing; then:

"What's the connection?" he inquired.

"May be none. Armitage's death has possibly spoiled their plans. Or Head Centre may suspect, though he can't know, that June saw what was under her pillow before it was removed."

"Before it was—gad! Got you! You think Armitage was coverin' her room for that very purpose?"

"Don't you?"

"I believe I do."

"There's only one other person in the house to-night, Stoppy, who may have the job!"

Stopford was silent. But the charming image of Madame Czerna leaped before his mind's eye.

"Yet—I don't understand," he muttered.

"Don't try to. I don't understand, myself, altogether. Be quiet . . . and listen."

There was silence in the room. Voices, subdued, might be heard about the house; faint footsteps. Somewhere in the neighbourhood of the kitchen garden, far to the rear, the dogs were whining restlessly. At last, except for this muted whining, quiet came again. A faint breeze, salt from the Sound, disturbed the leaves and refreshed the hot, still air. . . .

A minute passed; five minutes; ten minutes; then:

"D'you hear it?" Roscoe whispered.

A curious sibilant sound made itself audible.

"What the devil——"

"Ssh! You're all set?"

"Yes."

"Wait the word."

The odd sibilance continued. To Stopford, tensed, listening, it seemed to come from the bed. To remain silent, in the circumstances, was a mighty effort. What was happening?—or about to happen?

"We shall have to take the chance," Roscoe whispered. "But if you flash too soon, it will ruin everything."

The odd rustling continued. Otherwise, all was profoundly still. The sound went on—and on. It died down. It ceased. A faint breeze stirred the trees again.

"Any moment now," Roscoe muttered. "Stand by."

Stopford grasped the electric torch with which Roscoe had armed him.

"Now!" Roscoe snapped. "On to the pillow!"

There was a faint click in the darkness, and a disk

of white light appeared upon the pillow where Roscoe's head might have lain.

"Hell!" Roscoe began.

He stopped, and:

"Merciful heaven!" Stopford whispered in strange contrast, and the light wavered momentarily.

A hideous thing had crept over the edge of the lighted circle . . . a black thing which now raced about feverishly as if looking for something. It was a spider, with a queerly swollen body, possessing a wasp-like waist and many hairy, active legs.

"Good God!"

Roscoe sprang forward, arm upraised. He brought down the heavy heel of a golfing shoe upon the black horror . . . once! The softness of the pillow aiding, it still moved. Twice! The nauseous insect remained intact —whole. It lay still.

"Wait! Keep the light on it!"

Roscoe raced into the bathroom, to return in a moment with a glass. He clapped it over the spider, and:

"Hold it down!" he cried. "Tight, for your life! Switch the torch off! Do you hear it?"

The sibilant sound was audible again!

Roscoe stepped to the open window, moving his hands all about questingly. Suddenly he found what he sought, a tightly stretched strand of silk!

Even as he grasped it the strand was drawn through his fingers; the soft sound ceased; and the silken end shot out into the night. But, roughly, he had gauged the direction in which it was being drawn. Craning out, revolver in hand, he fired shot after shot into the boughs

of one of the tall trees starting up from the distant shrubbery.

Pandemonium awakened. Police whistles sounded remotely. The dogs swept into view. There was uproar in the house. As Roscoe jumped to the switch and the room became flooded with light, Regan burst in, followed by Dr. Cross. Ignoring their excited inquiries:

"Hold fast, Stopford!" Roscoe cried.

He grabbed a photograph from the mantelpiece, tore it from its frame, and slipped the board under the inverted tumbler. The room seemed to be full of people. Dr. Cross bent over the hideous exhibit.

"This is your province, Cross?" said Stopford, rather breathlessly. "You're a tropical man."

"Yes," said the other, "it is. It's an Hour-Glass Spider; an unusually large specimen." He shuddered. "It belongs out East. It's the only insect of its size whose bite is certainly fatal. Its victims swell up in a horrible way . . ."

"D'you see, Stopford!" cried Roscoe.

He jerked the pillow from the bed. Pinned at the back of it, in such a manner as to be invisible to the unconscious sleeper, was a wooden reel!

"But—June!" Stopford exclaimed. "Why should they want to——"

"They didn't!" Roscoe interrupted. "That was a rehearsal! Probably an ordinary garden spider was used on that occasion—to test the bridge. But to-night, having got me planted where they wanted me, they sent this black death across! Armitage had just completed the connection when the dogs reached him!"

A dozen voices began to speak at once. The dogs below were behaving madly. Ned Regan turned and thrust his way through the knot of excited people in the doorway.

§ II

"Tick—Tick! Ticker—Ticker—Tick—Tick!"

Madame Czerna shuddered and drew her wrap more closely about her shoulders. Through the open window came the wild chorus of the wolfhounds, racing madly from point to point of the grounds. The house resounded with hysterical voices and hurrying footsteps. Her door alone remained closed and locked.

She bent over the tiny, exquisite instrument contained in a miniature case.

"H.Q.," came over in Morse. "Head Centre. Make your report quickly."

"Zone 2 A," she signalled back. Her fingers were very unsteady. "Unable to move Stop Suspected Stop Shots fired Roscoe's room Stop. No other information Await orders Report ends"

"Conceal badge," came a message in reply. "Be on guard Stop Conceal instrument Stop Report . . ."

The head of a hatchet crashed through the panel of the door. A strong, hairy hand reached down and turned the key. The door was thrown open—and Ned Regan came in!

Madame Czerna leaped up.

"Ah!" Regan growled. "Thought so! I heard the Morse, my dear!"

He came forward.

"Madame Czerna," he said gruffly, "or whatever your

real name is, you're under arrest for complicity in the attempted murder of Commander Drake Roscoe."

The busy ticking had ceased. Echoing weirdly over the night waters of the Sound came the dense throb of an airplane propeller.

Madame Czerna, her beautiful face deathly pale, sank back into the chair from which she had arisen.

CHAPTER XV

At the Roadhouse

§ I

"I AM not thinking of myself," said the woman passionately. "My danger is great enough, but yours is greater. Please do as I ask."

Dawn was not far off, but the night was at its blackest. In that bleak hotel apartment the speaker stood, back to the shaded window, her attitude almost defiant. Slenderly beautiful in a scanty dance frock partly concealed by the fur wrap which she wore, she presented an irresistibly appealing figure to the man who faced her. But her too brilliant eyes were tragic, and pathetic little lines showed at the corners of her mouth.

Stopford wore a badly fitting overcoat, obviously someone else's, over his dinner kit. His face was masklike in its immobility. But one who had known him very well would have said that he was retaining his composure by a tense effort of will.

"Forget my danger," he said, his studied drawl designed as a sedative to threatened hysteria. "I am a gentleman at large, as the Cunard Line has dispensed with my services. That was my biggest danger—and it's happened."

"There are worse dangers," said Madame Czerna; "dangers that you have never met with in your life, that few know of. I tell you again you must let me go. What you suggest is impossible. Already they may be here. Turn the light out. I want to look along the road."

"I agree to that," said Stopford.

He depressed the switch and the room was plunged into darkness. As the shade was drawn aside, he could see his companion, a vague silhouette against the window. Her attitude was fearful, almost crouching, as she stared along the deserted country road. The building was utterly silent; the countryside was silent. At some spot not very remote the unmistakable song of the sea proclaimed itself, for this quaint old roadhouse overlooked Hudson Sound. Following a few moments of stillness:

"There is a car with all lights out," Madame Czerna whispered, "just at the bend beyond the tall trees. I tell you it is impossible. They will raid this place and they are desperate."

Her accent was music to the man who listened.

"But I'm doin' 'em a good turn," Stopford whispered back in the darkness. "You were pinched by the cops and I got you away. Shall I turn the light up?"

"No!" The word was spoken as an entreaty. "They are clever—they would realize what it meant."

"Look here," said Stopford, "I've taken a lot of chances and doubled on my best pal to get you out of a nasty corner. If you think I'm goin' to throw up the sponge now, you're makin' a bloomer. I've done a silly thing—a dam' silly thing I suppose—but it was the only way open. I couldn't see you pinched for attemptin'

to murder Drake Roscoe. I wanted you free first. Explanations can come later."

"Yet I was concerned in attempting to murder Drake Roscoe . . ."

It was a dramatic whisper in the darkness, its drama intensified by the accent of the speaker.

"What!"

"I have said it. It is true."

"You mean that you are . . . !" Stopford's voice failed him.

"I mean that I am a criminal. Yes. All that Commander Roscoe has suspected of me—all that you must have suspected also—has been true. I belong to the organization called the Zones. I am part of the machine controlled by the man who dreams he can become Emperor of America."

"Good God!"

"Please." Madame Czerna spoke urgently as Stopford moved. "Don't turn the light up. It would be dangerous. And, besides—I don't want you to see me."

"Very compromisin'," Stopford murmured.

"Compromising!" Madame Czerna laughed mirthlessly. "I am going to tell you a lot of things you want to know. I am going to uncover a lot of mysteries. You can make what use you like of what I tell you. Then, you must let me go."

"I'm prepared to listen," Stopford conceded, "but this doesn't mean that I accept your exorbitant terms."

"I don't care." She spoke urgently, with intense but restrained emotion. "To-night I have made up my mind to finish with it all. Listen closely, because perhaps I

shall never be able to tell you again what I am going to tell you now. There is a great conspiracy here, in America—greater than Communism, because it is directed by a cleverer man than Moscow ever produced. It is secret. It is what we call the Zones. I only know a small part of it—but what I know I am going to tell you."

She paused, and Stopford detected the fact that she was listening intently. The night remained silent, and presently she went on:

"The whole of New York City is mapped out, you understand. There are Divisions—I do not know how many. But in each Division there are three Zones. In each Zone are three Sectors. And in each Sector are four Groups. There is a man—if he is a man—called Head Centre. He controls all the Zones. I think, but I do not know, that there are similar Zones in all the great cities of the United States. They may link up with one another—I cannot say. But the man we call Head Centre controls them all. The Divisions are in charge of officials called Divisional chiefs; the Zones in charge of Zone officers. Under these Zone officers are three Sector captains; and under each Sector captain, four Group masters."

The dramatic voice ceased.

"Yes?" said Stopford—"please go on."

"I was listening again," Madame Czerna replied. "There are members of the Zones everywhere—perhaps even in this roadhouse."

But the silence was complete, and presently she continued:

"I am a Zone officer."

"What!" Stopford exclaimed. "*You* are a Zone officer?"

"Yes, I. You are alone in this building, which is surrounded, with an agent of the most dangerous criminal group the world has ever known! I have three Sector captains at my command; twelve Group masters, and fifty or sixty utterly desperate gunmen. Are you afraid?"

"Not a bit," Stopford returned. "I'm interested, more than a spot horrified, but entirely sympathetic. I'm waitin' for reasons."

"I shall tell you those reasons," Madame Czerna replied, "presently. First I want to assure you of something. I have never to my knowledge assisted in any crime against life—until to-night. You understand me? Lately I have found out that I was expected to do so —that I was expected blindly to obey the orders of Head Centre. To-night I was part of a plot to bring about the death of your friend, Drake Roscoe. They were right to arrest me. And so for this reason I have finished. It is done. Whatever the consequence, I am going to tell you all I know. Then you must let me go. You *will* let me go. Because you will never want to see me or speak to me again."

"Don't jump to conclusions," Stopford murmured. "For the moment, stick to facts. Seems to me there's one vulnerable spot in this web: I'm referrin' to Head Centre."

"Head Centre is a great genius . . ."

"Then you've met him!" Stopford exclaimed. "Describe the artist. Relate where he's to be caught performin'."

"I cannot describe him," Madame Czerna replied. "Whenever I have seen him he has been disguised. He wears a dreadful rubber mask. Even his hands are cased in rubber gloves."

"But the bird must roost somewhere?"

"I have always been *taken* to Headquarters, and I suppose the same routine is observed with other Zone officers"—she laughed harshly—"in a closed car with automatically fastened window shades. Except that the room in which he has interviewed me is somewhere in New York, I can give you no idea of its location."

"But it sounds like a nightmare to me," Stopford declared. "If it's true—and Roscoe believes some such fungous farm exists—it's marvellous, but ghastly. And at the same time, it has its weak points. It's a wonderful web, with one really wonky point, as I remarked before, the spider."

He stepped forward in the darkness toward Madame Czerna.

"Whoever you are and whatever you've done," said he, "you're a sport, through and through. This Zone bloke may be powerful, but Roscoe has got all the bally United States behind him. I'm not goin' to let you go. Forget you ever thought it. We're hand in hand on this thing. How you got into it is a blindin' mystery to me, but you've promised to explain."

He was beside her now.

"You don't understand," she said tremulously. "Wait until I have told you everything."

"You're *goin'* to tell me everything! But whatever you tell me will make no difference. We're goin' to see this thing through together."

"No, no!" she whispered—"it's impossible."

Then, suddenly, she was clinging to him, and his arms went about her. Nor did she resist, until:

"Listen!" she whispered. "Do you hear it—do you hear it?"

The man's clasp tightened.

"I hear it," he replied in a low voice. "But don't panic—it may be nothing."

Intruding upon the silence of the house had come a faint sound—a sound which must have been inaudible except to persons as tensed up as these two. It was that made by the creaking of a door being slowly opened.

CHAPTER XVI

"The Blue Barber"

§ I

New York suffers from insomnia. At an hour when even the gayer capitals of Europe would have begun to blink themselves into sleep, a certain street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue still displayed every evidence of liveliness.

A car endowed with that odd note of distinction which belongs to the Rolls turned into this street and pulled up before the door of a small and unpretentious restaurant.

The establishment was apparently closed since no lights were visible, and there was nothing in any way interesting about the appearance of the place, with the exception of its name, exhibited upon a sign protruding above the door. Without rhyme or reason, since this was a chop shop, the sign read "The Blue Barber."

A chauffeur sprang down, looked right and left along the street, and then pressed a bell beside the door. Almost immediately the door was opened. A man alighted from the Rolls and hurried in. The door closed. The chauffeur sprang back to the wheel and the car moved smoothly off in the direction of Sixth Avenue.

No patrolman had witnessed the arrival, which indeed in itself was unremarkable. But the Police Department would undoubtedly have been interested could they have penetrated to "The Blue Barber" with the visitor who had arrived in the Rolls.

As the street door closed, out of utter darkness:

"H. Q.," said a musical voice. "Anything to report?"

"No."

The reply was spoken gutturally, with a pronounced German accent.

"Stand by."

The speaker, whose overcoat collar was turned up and the brim of whose hat was turned down, passed along a dark passage, with which he must have been familiar. He pressed a button and a faint sound indicated that a panel door had opened. He entered. The panel closed behind him.

He mounted a short flight of stairs, now using an electric torch to assist him in the darkness. He came to a stair landing, apparently consisting of the stairhead, a window, shaded, and two blank walls.

His foot pressed upon a square of geometrically patterned carpet and one of the walls slid back, proving to be the door of an elevator. Into this the man stepped, closed the door, and the elevator ascended. It stopped at the sixth floor and the man stepped out into a barely furnished sitting room, switching on the light as he entered.

There were many people in New York who would have been interested to learn that the rather neglected looking bookcase in this apartment was really the door

of another elevator. But the visitor did not delay here. He crossed to the door, switched off the light, and went out.

Using the torch, he traversed a long corridor, many apartments opening upon it from right and left. Coming to the end, he descended three flights of marble steps. The torch went out. In utter darkness, he stood awhile, listening. Then came a jingling of keys, as he admitted himself to a large well-appointed office, revealed when, closing the door behind him, he again flashed the torch.

There were many desks, cabinets, and tables. He crossed the big public office, entered a private office beyond, and shone a disc of light upon a note which lay there on a large pedestal table. Then came darkness once more, the sound of a panel door opening and closing; and this strange bat moving in the night of the city was once more in a small elevator, ascending. Eight floors were passed. At the ninth the car stopped.

He was again in a long dark corridor along which the moving ray danced strangely. It terminated in a flight of stairs. He mounted four floors. Windows lighted the landings and the torch became extinguished again.

Yet another door was opened and closed and an extensive range of offices traversed. The man moved confidently and almost silently. Wraith-like he passed from building to building, but ever mounting higher. Finally, he came out into the strangest room in New York City.

A square room it was, no more than ten paces from

wall to wall, and seemingly possessing neither doors nor windows. He had entered it through a panel in the south wall from the small elevator which had borne him there. The panel was now closed.

This was a black and gold room. The walls were black and gold, and the ceiling was a high dome of dull gold. It was lighted by four lamps in black tripods, and, except for a long narrow table set in the centre of the western wall, was very bare in appearance. The man seated himself at this table, glancing at a number of notes which lay there. He did not remove his hat, but a standard lamp on the table threw his face into startling relief against the blackness of the background.

And the face so revealed was strangely like that of Napoleon Buonaparte.

For a moment this impression prevailed, then came complete darkness, until a point of red light suddenly broke it.

"H. Q.," said a sing-song voice.

The man in the darkened room replied:

"Report of Zone Officer 2 A."

"No report to hand."

"Report of H.Q. patrol covering."

"To hand," replied the sing-song voice. "Patrol reports that Zone Officer 2 A escaped from the custody of Ned W. Regan at 3:48 A.M. It is believed that her escape was effected by Dr. Stopford, who left the Page Sutton home at the same time. H.Q. patrol detailed three firing groups. Timed 4 A.M. Report ends."

"Report of Group masters detailed," came the musical tones.

"Only one report to hand," was the answer. "Group

Master 3, Sector 3 A 3, reports Zone Officer 2 A located at roadhouse fifteen miles from home of Page Sutton, accompanied by Dr. Stopford. Group master standing by. Awaits instructions. This by X Radio. Timed 4:21. Report ends."

Five minutes passed in complete silence, then out of the darkness came crisp orders.

"Instruct Divisional Chief A to despatch three more firing groups to hold all approaches to the roadhouse. Zone Officer 3 A to be put in charge. He is to endeavour at once to get in touch with Zone Officer 2 A. File quarter hourly reports. Move. Stand by for another order."

A moment of silence, then:

"Report of Zone Officer 1 A covering the Page Sutton home," the musical voice resumed.

"Report to hand. Ned W. Regan left in his car headed for the city at 4:05 A.M. Group master covering. Commander Drake Roscoe has not left. Operations unsuccessful. Zone officer awaits instructions. Report ends."

"Report of Divisional Chief B."

Immediately came the reply:

"Report to hand. All A units have been successfully withdrawn, although every road is heavily patrolled by police. Report ends."

"Instruct Divisional Chief B," came the order, "to assemble all A units in Sector 3 B 2 and to take personal charge. At the earliest moment he will hand them over to Divisional Chief A. He will then stand by for instructions to intercept Commander Drake Roscoe in the event of his leaving the Page Sutton home. Directly contact is established with Zone Officer 2 A, put her in

touch with me. If Dr. Stopford endeavours to leave, he is to be intercepted. Excepting those employed under Schedules 9 and 11, all units in all Divisions are to stand by. This is a General Emergency Order. Move."

The red light went out.

CHAPTER XVII

At the Roadhouse (*concluded*)

§ I

"THE reason I am so hopelessly in the power of Head Centre," said Madame Czerna, "is that my husband, who died, was sentenced for a crime which he never committed. Three months after our marriage he was sent to Devil's Island."

"Good God!" Stopford exclaimed.

"I succeeded," the tense voice went on, "after two years of trying, in getting the French authorities to consent to allow me to go out to Cayenne. This of course by their law made me a convict too, and after the death of my husband I was forbidden to return. I was expected to remain in French Guiana."

"But," said Stopford, "this is staggerin' inhumanity."

"It is," she confessed, "greater than you know. But it is the law of the penal settlement. I should perhaps have remained in that awful place all my life, had it not been for the help of the man we knew as Head Centre."

"You don't mean to say that he can do conjurin' tricks in French Guiana?"

"He has agents everywhere," she returned calmly. "In this particular case, his agents were engaged in a plot to get away two men who at some time had be-

longed to the Zone organization. One of them realized I might be of use, I suppose, and when the plans for escape were complete, I was included."

Abruptly she ceased speaking. Then in a whisper:

"I think there is someone outside the door!" she said.

Silently Stopford crossed the room and suddenly threw the door wide open. He flashed the light of an electric torch into the corridor. It was empty from end to end. He returned and closed the door.

"Nothing," he reported, switching off the torch. "Yet I admit I thought I heard someone movin'."

"It is certain," Madame Czerna replied in a low voice, "that there are members of the Group watching this house. More than likely there are spies inside."

"Thousands of cheers," said Stopford. "At least we can make a fight for it. But please go on. If there's to be a rough-house, first I'm dyin' to know all about you. It's important."

Following a moment's silence:

"By means of this wonderful organization," Madame continued, "we all got away from Devil's Island—in my case, from Cayenne. We started in a sailing boat, and at the point arranged met a motor yacht which took us to Brazil. Perfect arrangements had been made to help us safely to return to Europe. What became of one of the two men, I don't know. The other is in New York. But I was given a passport bearing the name of 'Fée Czerna,' which is not my own—at least, the first name is, but not the second—and what looked like my own photograph. Head Centre's methods are unique—perfect.

"But he held me in his power. He knew my true record and could at any moment hand me over to France. Innocent as I am of any crime against the French, all the same, according to their law I am a convict—by my own will I know; but liable to be returned to Guiana after extradition. I was finally brought to New York, and although I knew I was employed by a group enemy to the United States Government, I thought, until recently, it was political.

"I have no reason to love governments, and I did not scruple to work for Head Centre. Only lately I have found out that the Zone group is criminal—a murder gang! I have struggled like a rat in a trap to escape."

"Tell me," said Stopford eagerly, "do you know any point in New York from which it would be possible to locate the headquarters of these sportsmen? I mean, when you first met Head Centre Esquire, what was the last point you passed before they sort of begun to puzzle you?"

"I can tell you this," Madame Czerna replied: "it was a restaurant, bearing the extraordinary name of 'The Blue Barber.' I was taken there one night after the restaurant was closed. I was led into a sort of office at the far end of the dining room. I was blindfolded and led on upstairs and downstairs, along passages, and into elevators for what seemed an endless time. At last I found myself alone with Head Centre, in an indescribable black and gold room."

She shuddered, and abruptly ceased speaking. Stopford was silent. At last:

"He is terrible," she whispered. "His force of character is so great that one can feel it physically. At the

end of our first interview I came down in an elevator from this room to another, many floors below. Again I was blindfolded and led through a perfect maze. At last I was placed in a car, and the scarf was removed from my eyes. But the car had automatically shuttered windows!

"They were raised by the chauffeur, but not until we were driving into the Hotel Plaza at which I was staying. I have never since been to 'The Blue Barber.'

"Twice again, once very recently, I have been called to Headquarters. But I have been taken a different way each time. I think in the days when I first came to New York it was perhaps the only entrance. Since then I have been driven in one of the closed cars and have alighted in a garage.

"I am glad to have had time to tell you so much."

§ II

In a house fifteen miles distant Commander Drake Roscoe sat at a telephone. He was speaking to Ned W. Regan, America's most famous private detective, and the conversation doubtless would have interested Head Centre.

"Yes," said Roscoe, every line of his tanned, square-cut features exhibiting eagerness, "you're in touch with the deputy commissioner in charge of the cordon and you've doubled back. Where are you speaking from?"

"Police post," came the growling voice of Regan, "two miles south of you. There hasn't been a single arrest. All the gang concentrated on the Page Sutton home have slipped through the lines someway. Looks to

me, from what I've picked up, like the parties concerned were outside respectable. D'you get me? Almost everybody on the roads has been questioned, but no suspicious characters have passed—in cars, anyway. On foot maybe lots have slipped through."

"Then we're all clear here?"

"I guess so," said Regan. "The police boys are pretty well in touch with you. Any minute they'll be there."

"Any news of Madame Czerna?"

"Sure thing. She passed a patrolman, headed south, with your English boy friend Stopford. They got by all right, but the cop took the number of the car, and it's out of the Page Sutton garage. That sailor doctor is a wise guy. I hope you love him as much as you used to."

Roscoe laughed boyishly:

"I'm glad," he declared. "She's safe enough while she's with him. A very charming woman, Regan. I hated the thought of her in the Tombs."

"I hate the thought of her outside it!" Regan growled. "She's the key to the mystery. There's bad trouble ahead of Mr. Stopford. They're hot on his tracks and when they get him—he's for it!"

"You're short-sighted, Regan," Roscoe declared. "He'll have her turn state's evidence. His clever trick of getting her out of the house will bring us more of the information we want than any routine police methods could do."

"Glad you're happy," Regan returned. "You've a right to be—you escaped with your life. But the net's empty, Commander. We are no further into the puzzle of the Zones than we ever were."

"Oh, yes, we are," said Roscoe. "We're getting there

slowly but all the same we're getting. When we round up Stopford and Madame Czerna we shall be miles in front of where we are now. Keep in touch, because I'm afraid of one thing."

"What's that?"

"If the Zone gang gets in first, I'm thinking that Stopford will have a mighty thin time."

"They ought to be glad," said Ned Regan. "He got one of their mob away."

"True," Roscoe admitted; "but he knows too much now. It's urgent, Regan. They must be traced quickly."

"Listen," Regan demanded—"I've just seen something! I've been eating my face since that duo got away —thinking you had 'em covered. It's just come to me that you could have stopped that elopement! Gee! it's clear as ice! . . . You let 'em go!"

"You're right," said Roscoe grimly. "My way isn't always your way, Regan. This was my way . . . and I'm responsible. But I want a report on them inside twenty minutes."

Ned W. Regan might quite plainly be heard breathing heavily; then:

"They'll be reported in quarter of an hour," said he, "because they were headed for nowhere, and the wires are humming all along their route. Inside of fifteen miles they must take cover, cut inland, or drive into the sea. It's just routine. Good-bye."

Roscoe replaced the receiver and turned as there came a rap at the door.

"Come in," said he.

A police captain entered. Roscoe glanced at him, and:

"Are you with the first cordon?" he asked.

"I am, sir."

"Anything to report?"

"Nothing. There hasn't been a single arrest."

"Clever staff work," said Roscoe bitterly. "This section was thick with members of a dangerous criminal gang up to an hour ago. You had a ring around the whole territory—yet every rat of them has slipped through."

"Looks that way," the captain admitted, watching the speaker's grim face.

"Only one hope now," Roscoe went on. "Stand by with every car you can muster."

§ III

In a darkened room—a room which might be approached circuitously from "The Blue Barber"—a speck of red light glowed.

"H.Q.," said a monotonous voice. "Report of Sector Captain 1 A 1 in charge of party covering roadhouse. Zone Officer 2 A is still there, with Dr. Stopford. Zone Officer 3 A is expected to take over immediately. Timed 5:05. Report ends."

"Report of Divisional Chief A."

"No report to hand."

Some moments of silence followed, then:

"Report of H.Q. patrol covering Sector Captain 1 A 1," said the musical voice of the man masked in the darkness of the room.

"To hand. Patrol reports two firing groups with

Group masters stationed north and south of roadhouse, with cars. Four more groups standing by. Sector captain has taken charge and made usual dispositions. Timed five. Report ends."

Another interval of silence ensued. One might almost have sensed the feverish activity of that master mind weaving schemes there in the darkness. The red light glowed; and at last:

"Instruct Sector captain in charge," came a crisp order, "to report instantly the arrival of Zone Officer 3 A, and put him through to me on X Radio. Get in touch with Divisional Chief A. This is vitally urgent. Reassemble dispersed units in their own Zones. All units will stand by. Move."

The red light went out.

From the darkness of a wall an illuminated map sprang suddenly into view. It was a map of New York City and its environs. And it was covered with an intricate network of concentric circles, each split up into divisions and subdivisions. It was the much sought Zone map—the map for which more than one wealthy man would have sacrificed a big slice of his fortune. It showed, variously coloured, the notorious Zones of the giant criminal group which enveloped New York . . . and it revealed what so many were seeking, the location of Head Centre.

Presumably the formidable genius who had created and who controlled this dreadful and secret weapon against society was studying it from where he sat.

But there was no sound to indicate his presence. And suddenly the map disappeared as mysteriously as it had appeared.

§ IV

"I am sure there is someone moving about this house," said Madame Czerna.

Dawn was eerily creeping over the countryside. A wan gray light began to be visible through the chinks of the shades. Stopford was at one of the windows, peering cautiously along the road, right and left.

"There is a car parked north just by the bend," he reported in a low voice, "and another south."

The woman laughed drearily.

"We are surrounded," she replied. "I know it. And some of them are inside! I am safe. I am one of them. But they will never let you go free, for they will not know what you may have learned. Listen! Don't you hear it?"

Out of an electric silence:

"Yes," Stopford admitted. "There is some bloke prowlin'! But it may be the house servants. Mornin' will soon be here. Don't panic."

"There is just one hope," Madame Czerna went on monotonously. "One of the men who got away with me from the penal settlement is now my superior officer in the Zones. Please do not misunderstand. But he is fond of me. I have never rewarded him. Yet I think he might help me."

"I'm not keen on his help," drawled Stopford.

"You are mad! Surely you have seen enough to know that your life would mean no more than"—she snapped her fingers—"if you stood in their way."

"True enough," Stopford admitted. "But what's to do?"

"I must try to rouse someone. There is no all-night telephone service here. I can call the Divisional chief . . ."

"What! You know his number?"

"Yes."

"What about Head Centre?"

"No one knows his number. Unless the Divisional chiefs do. This I cannot say."

A dim, slenderly ghostly figure in the grayness, she crossed the room and took up the telephone. Sounds of furtive movements in the corridor became unmistakable.

"Quick," she said, "lock the door!"

Urgently, she was banging the lever up and down.

Stopford locked the door.

Monotonously the lever banged up and down.

Someone turned the door handle, as:

"Yes! Yes!" Madame Czerna whispered. "Please connect me with the exchange! Thank you."

Faint footsteps receded in the corridor outside. It was growing rapidly lighter. Stopford could see Madame's slender fingers twitching nervously. He crossed to the window, then pulled up, as:

"Exchange?" said the woman.

She asked for a park number, of which Stopford made a careful mental note. Someone passed in the road, just below the window, walking slowly, then:

"Zone 2 A," said Madame Czerna in a low, tense voice. "Please connect me with Divisional chief . . . What is that? . . . He is on service? . . . Get him by X at once and tell him to call—wait a moment."

She put her hand over the mouthpiece and turned to Stopford.

"Your torch, quick!" she whispered. "What is this number?"

A ray of light shone out. It showed the beautiful pale face of the woman holding the instrument as she stooped to read the number. She nodded, and Stopford switched the light off.

Madame Czerna removed her hand from the mouthpiece and repeated the number twice.

"Yes," she said. "Is it clear? Get him at once and give him my message. Good-bye."

She replaced the receiver.

"Did you understand?"

In the half light Stopford nodded.

"What's this bloke's job of work in the world? I mean, ostensibly."

She watched him, then:

"Will you promise to keep my confidence if I tell you?" she asked.

"Yes. I suppose I must."

"My Divisional chief in private life is a well-known member of the New York Stock Exchange."

"Good God!" Stopford murmured. "No wonder poor old Roscoe has been so hard up against it! What a gang! And did I gather that the gentleman was out on business?"

"He is away on Zone work—yes."

"You mentioned 'X.' What, exactly, is 'X'?"

She hesitated, then:

"All the officers above the rank of Group master," she explained, dully, "are provided with a portable radio apparatus, a secret invention of Head Centre. Mine was

left behind when I ran away. It is in my manicure case."

"Then this midnight sportsman will be called up right away from his Divisional Headquarters?"

"Yes. He may communicate at any moment. . . ."

There came a loud bang on the door. Madame Czerna found herself in Stopford's arms. He stooped and kissed her.

"Open this door!" commanded a harsh voice, "or we'll break it in!"

She switched up the light, turning swiftly away, conscious that she was dishevelled and haggard after the long night of anxiety.

Stopford threw the door open.

Four men entered. All wore black half masks and carried repeaters. A fifth man came in behind the quartette. He looked toward Madame Czerna and drew aside the lapel of his topcoat. There was a glitter of diamonds. He dropped the lapel.

"There is a car waiting for you," he said tersely. "Head Centre's orders."

Madame Czerna glanced despairingly at Stopford. There came a sudden outcry from below: it was suddenly and significantly silenced.

"Poor bloke," Stopford murmured. "That would be the night porter. Efficient, but unpleasant."

The leader of the party crossed to the telephone.

§ V

In that room which harboured the only existing copy of the Zone map, a spot of red light glowed.

"H.Q.," a voice announced. "Report of Zone Officer 3 A in charge of party covering roadhouse. He has obtained access in the usual manner, with a firing group. Group master is covering night porter. Road held by Groups 3 and 4, Sector 3 A 1. All in order. Dr. Stopford detained. Timed five twenty. Report ends."

"Report of Divisional Chief A."

"Report to hand. Chief A is proceeding to roadhouse in accordance with instructions. This report by X Radio. No time. Report ends."

"Report of H.Q. patrol covering."

"To hand. Patrol reports that two groups hold all approaches, and that Zone Officer 3 A with third group has entered the roadhouse. Divisional chief has just arrived. Timed five twenty-eight. Report ends."

Silence ensued for the space of a minute or more; then:

"Advise Divisional chief," an order was rapped out clearly, "to bring Dr. Stopford direct to H. Q., Entrance Seven. Zone Officer 2 A will report to me here immediately. Instruct Zone Officer 3 A to withdraw acting units to their Zones. All units standing by to be dismissed. Move."

The red light went out.

§ VI

"Very interestin'," said Stopford, as the masked man replaced the receiver. He glanced at Madame Czerna, and then addressed the leader of the group: "You have certainly 'obtained access,' although I don't know what 'the usual manner' may be."

He stared through his monocle at the armed quartette silently standing by, and:

"I take it you're a 'firin' group,' " he said, "and whilst I can't agree that 'all's in order,' it's painfully obvious that I'm 'detained'!"

From some place below came a soft whistle. The man whom Stopford had addressed glanced toward the open door. Madame Czerna started.

A sixth masked man entered the room.

He wore evening kit under his topcoat. At his entrance four pistols covered him. He drew back a lapel of his coat. There was a rapid flash of diamonds.

"Get out!" he said tersely. "Stand by below."

"Divisional chief!" exclaimed the man in charge.

A moment later the room was occupied only by the last arrival, Stopford, and Madame Czerna. The latter closed the door behind the departing gunmen, and:

"Thank you!" she said fervently. "I counted on you —and you came just in time!"

"Don't count on too much," was the reply. "I'm tied hand and foot, and I still don't see what I can do——"

He ceased speaking.

From the roadway came a roaring of powerful engines . . . several shots . . . an outcry.

The masked man ran to the window. It was now daylight. Even as he drew the shade aside there was a scurrying of feet on the stairs. A muffled shot from somewhere in the house. He turned as the door was thrown open.

Drake Roscoe burst in, half a dozen police at his heels!

"Roscoe!"

Stopford sprang forward.

"A haul at last!" cried Roscoe. His eyes were bright with triumph. "Three Group masters, twelve gunmen, two Zone officers, and"—he stared at the man in dress clothes—"if I'm not misinformed, a Divisional chief."

Dr. Stopford turned to Madame Czerna. She avoided his glance; but silently his lips framed the words:

"Thank God!"

CHAPTER XVIII

The White Room

§ I

In a white room a black figure was seated. Neither hemisphere could have provided another such room—nor another figure like this.

The room was circular and surmounted by a dome. This dome was carried out in mother-o'-pearl, so that its effect was rather like that of a tropical evening sky. It was invisibly lighted. It served as a reflector and dimly illuminated the room as if by moonlight. The walls were panelled in the same manner and outlined in ebony.

There was but little furniture. At a large white table littered with papers and provided with a number of complicated and queer-looking switchboards sat the sole occupant of the room.

This was a woman.

She wore a black velvet robe of mediæval fashion. It sheathed her figure like a serpent's skin. Her arms and shoulders were perfectly moulded and almost abnormally white. Her hair, which she wore in the Spanish manner, coiled low on her neck, was blue-black, like a raven's wing in reflected sunlight. From her ears depended large hoops of diamonds.

Her luminous, darkly fringed eyes staring straight

before her, she sat motionless; her brows were two perfect straight lines. Slim, exquisite hands rested upon the table. On the index finger of the right hand a diamond ring of notable design and size struck a blatant note.

A faint sound became audible. It was like that of a distant silver bell. In a small lacquer cabinet upon the table a speck of red light sprang to life. The effect was as though some tiny hidden animal had peered out with one infuriated eye.

"G.H.Q.," said a guttural voice.

The voice was that apparently of someone in the room. But no one had entered the room—which, in common with another for which at this very moment New York Police Headquarters were searching—possessed no visible doors.

"Report of Head Centre, New York," replied the woman.

Her voice was low, vibrant, intense; utterly passionless, like the snow mantling a sleeping volcano. Her full red lips scarcely moved, so softly did she speak. Her expression remained unchanged.

"Head Centre, New York, is on the line."

"Connect him."

Beside the speck of red light within the little cabinet a companion speck appeared. It was mauve.

The woman slightly moved one of those slender white hands. A tapering finger touched a button. The room became plunged in darkness.

"Head Centre, New York," said a musical male voice, seemingly from a few paces away. "Standing by in H.Q."

"Your report."

"Following complete failure at the home of Page Sutton, already reported, Zone Officer 2 A—Fée Czerna—escaped to a neighbouring roadhouse in the company of the English ship's surgeon—Dr. Stopford—of whom you have been notified. Usual routine was followed. Commander Drake Roscoe, in charge of state operations, raided the house at five thirty this morning. The following officers are detained: Divisional Chief A, Zone Officer 2 A, Zone Officer 3 A, Group Masters 2, 3, and 4, Sector 3 A 1, with operatives, twelve in all, of their Groups. Acting upon untraceable information, Deputy Commissioner Burke has closed all streets surrounding H.Q., New York. Traffic has been diverted. A raid upon 'The Blue Barber' is pending. Staff standing by. Other units dispersed. Awaiting instructions. Report ends."

There were some moments of silence. Then came the woman's calm voice:

"Divisional Chiefs B and C will report to Head Centre, Chicago, at the earliest possible moment. Advise Chicago. Divisional Chief D will report Head Centre, Philadelphia, at eight o'clock to-night. Advise Philadelphia. Each Divisional chief will follow the usual emergency routine regarding his Zone officers before leaving. Transmit this order and stand by for another."

Silence fell again. From out of the darkness sprang an illuminated map. It must have occupied a great part of the wall facing the table at which the woman was seated. In the dim light which its appearance created, her beautiful, cold face looked less human than ever.

The map was that of the United States. And over the whole of it spread a delicate network of circles. It

seemed as though many patient spiders, each spinning a web of different colour, had laboured from every important city on the map. But the outer edge of each web touched the outer edge of another.

Section by section, the map became blackened out, in response to manipulation of those tapered fingers, until only the Zones surrounding New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago remained visible.

Then, suddenly, these disappeared also, as:

"Head Centre, New York," said the man's toneful voice. "Order transmitted."

"Instruct all members of H.Q. staff," the woman resumed immediately, as though no interval had occurred, "to report to chief of staff here to-morrow. Employ emergency routine. As it is evident that important information is in the hands of Drake Roscoe, do your utmost in the time you have to blind the inquiry. Report to me, personally, to-morrow. Move."

Inside the lacquer cabinet the mauve light and the red light went out.

§ II

"Bring that torch forward," said Deputy Commissioner Burke.

The end of his cigar glowed in the darkness of the landing. The beloved but feared chief of police was a rare enough figure at a raid. But this raid was something quite out of the ordinary. No less than four hundred men were engaged.

"There you are, Chief."

A wide disk of light shone upon an office door. This

door carried the name of a firm well known in the city.

"Is Cartwright there?" Burke growled.

"Here, Chief."

"Have you 'phoned Bronson we need his office keys?"

"He's out of town."

"Crowbars," said Burke.

Two hefty officers came forward out of the shadows, and there ensued a creaking and splintering sound as the pair attacked the door. The landing and the stair leading up to it were crowded with men. As the work of destruction proceeded, out of grim silence:

"We're on the eighteenth, sir," came a voice.

"Are we, Markham?" Burke snapped back. "I thought we'd got into the basement."

Laughter, subdued and respectful, followed the sally. Captain Markham of Headquarters was a dangerous man to laugh at. Then:

"What I mean, sir," he went on, "is this: according to information, the room we're looking for is very high up."

"We're getting warm, then?"

"According to the sketch plan which I have here, we're getting very warm! The Scudamore Building is at the end of this block. And we can't be far from the end now."

"Well?"

"Isn't it possible that this place is at the top of the Scudamore tower?"

"Very possible!" came a loud voice from some point on the stairs below. A disturbance proclaimed itself. "Who said that? He's a good man!"

"Commander Roscoe," Burke muttered.

Roscoe made his way up to the landing.

"I've just returned from a flight with a pilot of the air squad," said he. "Our latest information pointed to a room in a tower—a room with no windows."

"Well?" said Burke.

"The top floor of the Scudamore tower has no windows! It's the only place of the kind in the city."

A great crash told that the door was down.

"Good for you, Markham!" said Burke.

A dozen torches spat sudden beams, and the raiding party poured into the Bronson offices.

§ III

In that room paved and decorated in black and gold a man was seated. Upon the blank wall facing his grotesque figure a point of red light sprang into life.

"H.Q.," came a monotonous voice. "All orders have been carried out. All Divisional H.Q.'s, are vacated. No other arrests reported. Party under Deputy Commissioner Burke operating from Exit Seven, 'The Blue Barber,' has proceeded as far as the Bronson offices. They are following a plan believed to have been made by Zone Officer 2 A. Zone Officer 1 B, Max Solke, detailed to stand by, has reported that finding of entrance to private elevator is only a matter of time. Commander Drake Roscoe, flying over the city, is believed to have located H.Q. He has joined the raiding party. Standing by. Report ends."

The masked figure did not stir. Absolute silence prevailed in this strange room; then:

"Connect chief chemist," said the musical voice.

Beside the red light a blue light appeared.

"Laboratory," came a gruff voice. "Chief chemist."

"Report to me personally at once."

The blue light went out. A flexible gloved hand moved. A switch was touched. The red light went out.

A door hidden in the wall on the left of the long table opened and showed an elevator. From the car a man stepped into the oddly lighted room. He was a thick-set Hanoverian, having a shock of graying fair hair, a bushy moustache, and an expression of inflexible good humour. He wore spectacles of high magnifying power and was attired in gray-blue overalls.

The door closed behind him. He bowed awkwardly, regarding the dreadful figure behind the table.

"Is the map removed?" the masked man demanded.

"Yes."

"The laboratory is stripped?"

"Completely."

"Bring up the figure. Then you may go. Report to H.Q. Cincinnati on Thursday at 5 P.M. I will shut off the power from the elevator."

The elevator door reopened. The chief chemist made his awkward bow and went out. The door closed.

CHAPTER XIX

Raided

§ I

THE commander of the *Ruritania* woke up with a start.

"That you, Quartermaster?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry to disturb you. But Dr. Stopford has just come aboard and insists he must see you."

"Stopford!"

The captain was out of bed in a flash. Dr. Stopford, most popular young surgeon of the Western ocean, had jumped his ship on the last voyage under mysterious circumstances and had been duly fired by Liverpool when the log was produced. Now, in the early morning, a few hours before sailing, he was aboard.

"Where is he?"

"Outside in your room, sir."

"Alone?"

"No. There's a lady with him."

"Oh!" said the captain.

When he appeared—in uniform but wearing a white muffler—he found his ex-surgeon, in evening kit and a badly fitting topcoat, seated on the settee with a remarkably pretty Frenchwoman who, though somewhat dishevelled, also might have come from a dance.

"Ah, Sir Harry," said Stopford, his composure dis-

arming in those unusual circumstances, "beastly sorry to dig you out, but the fact is we're rather up against it. Madame Czerna is dyin' to meet you." He turned to his charming companion. "This is Captain Sir Harry Bristol."

The captain, who had an eye for a pretty woman, regretted that he was unshaven.

"What's afoot, Stopford?" he asked. "Your disappearance here in New York last trip caused me endless anxiety. Did you fall into a trap?"

"I did!" said Stopford, glancing at Madame Czerna. "I fell into a trap laid by the Zone gang . . ."

"The Zone gang?"

Stopford removed his monocle, burnished and replaced it.

"There's a bloke here in New York," he went on deliberately, "who has got—or who had got—the entire city under his thumb. Our mutual friend, Drake Roscoe, nearly lost his priceless life in gettin' him. Our friend here"—he grasped Madame Czerna's hand reassuringly—"is still in deadly danger. Hence our croppin' up on board so unceremoniously."

"You mean?" said the commander.

"I mean we claim sanctuary! How, goodness only knows, but we've got through the enemy's lines. Now we're out of their territory. There are no agents of the Zones aboard the old *Ruritania*."

"I've heard something about this Zone business," the captain admitted, "from Roscoe. But I'm pretty badly puzzled all the same. He considered he was up against the most highly organized gang of crooks in the history of crime."

"He was right!" Stopford declared—"positively and definitely accurate!"

"Well, where do you come in?"

"Because of me," Madame Czerna answered. Bristol thought her accent enchanting. "I . . . was one of them!"

"What!"

The captain shouted the word as though, standing on the navigation bridge, he had addressed some slovenly operative on a dockside.

"They had a hold over me." She laid her hand, restrainingly, upon Stopford's arm. "Now I have left them, and given all the information I can to Commander Roscoe. But——"

"But," Stopford broke in, "her life and her liberty are at stake as a result." He spoke sternly. Voice and expression had changed subtly. It was as though a disguised man had doffed his disguise. "At the moment Roscoe looks like winnin'. But for either of us to go ashore would be almost certain death!"

§ II

"This sounds a bit hollow, Chief!"

The raiding party, now far above and south of "The Blue Barber," was nearer a big discovery than any member realized.

"Tear it down."

Burke gave the order without raising his voice.

In contrast to the low tones, the splintering, straining, and creaking which followed had the dramatic value of a sandstorm bursting on the stillness.

"Where's Commander Roscoe?"

Nobody knew.

"Get Neville on the Bronson 'phone. Advise him we look like we'd found the shaft. Where's Solke?"

"Here," came a smooth voice.

Beams from torches split the darkness. The power was cut off in these offices. Men strained at the task of forcing the false panel.

"Where did you go five minutes back?"

"I went to see where Commander Roscoe had gone to."

"Come out into the light."

Max Solke, private secretary to Deputy Commissioner Burke, and trustee of Police Headquarters secrets, showed a pale, intellectual face in the ray of a torch.

"You made a call on the Bronson line."

"I admit it, sir."

"You were covered. Roscoe put me wise."

Max Solke, Zone Officer 1 B, registered no emotion. But his high forehead glistened oddly.

"You're under arrest. Take him away."

A murmur, subdued both by astonishment and respect for the formidable commissioner, greeted this order.

"Markham, you're responsible for the prisoner."

"Very good, sir."

Out on the avenues and along a piece of Broadway, early-morning traffic was in a chaotic state. The police, who didn't know what it was all about nor why this extra work had been piled on to them, tried hard to keep tempers sweet. Some of the drivers, especially

those who had been out all night, failed to respond. Fully a score of tickets were handed to the holders of formerly unblemished licences. And a grim-faced Irishman smoking an amazingly long cigar on the twenty-second floor of the Scudamore Building was the cause of all the trouble.

The work of demolition proceeded. And presently the mechanism of a sliding panel being uncovered, a small elevator shaft was revealed. Lights were cast upward and downward.

Deputy Commissioner Burke's smouldering cigar was intruded into the cavity.

"A good man might climb that cable," he growled, staring up reflectively, "but when he reached the top——" He turned. "Who's got the plan?"

"Here, Chief."

"Are we at the base of the Scudamore tower?"

"Sure we are."

"Get out on to the fire ladders. We'll explore the top three floors."

Reaching back, he took a torch from the hand of the man standing nearest to him and, craning through the shattered panel, shot a white ray up the shaft.

"Good God!"

"What is it, Chief!"

Burke staggered as supporting arms went around him.

The torch all but fell from his hand.

"What's the matter, Burke?"

He came about, facing the speaker. Roscoe had rejoined the party.

"Up there," Burke replied, not quite steadily, "near the top of the shaft . . . something looked down at me."

"Something?"

"A yellow, hairless thing—like a mummy! But it moved!"

"Ah!" Roscoe laughed shortly. "So he's still up there!"

"He? The thing I saw wasn't human."

"Human or otherwise, the thing you saw is the thing we're after. That's Head Centre!"

§ III

Some high-powered instrument sparked viciously in the darkness of a room near the summit of the Scudamore tower. There came a swift tapping. Translated, it meant:

"Great Head Centre. Your report."

The man masked by darkness replied:

"New York Head Centre Stop Raiding party taking to fire ladders Stop New York Zones vacated Stop All according to plan Report ends."

A distant sound penetrated, a sound of dull blows and of mingled excited voices. The instrument rapped again briefly:

"Withdraw."

Through a semi-shaded window a glare of white light shone, passed, and seemed to leave the room darker by contrast. Searchlight units had been detailed by the Fire Department, and the Scudamore tower rose through the misty darkness fitfully illuminated by mov-

ing beams. Ant-like, men might be seen swarming up the ladders on the east of the building.

The room as revealed in that transient flash proved to be a laboratory. There was evidence to show that a quantity of apparatus had recently been removed, and the shelves and cases were significantly bare.

A man stood at a small switchboard, his hat brim shading his features. Now, in the new darkness, he threw the light of a torch on to the board, reached up, and unscrewed a large valve.

Hatchets were at work somewhere close at hand. There was a faint creaking sound. Then silence fell in the deserted laboratory, except for the noise made by the raiders.

The morning was gloomily dark. A sort of pall seemed to hang above the city. Early workers and belated revellers thronged the streets adjoining the barricades, all staring upward to where the Scudamore tower, fairylike, glittered magically, an enchanted minaret.

Burke's niece, Molly O'Hay, with her friend, Page Sutton's daughter, observed this phenomenon from afar. Escorted by Ned W. Regan, she was hastening to the battle area.

At a point of vantage, Regan, sitting beside the chauffeur, checked the car. He turned.

"Look!" said he, and indicated the distant tower, mysteriously illuminated under a drab drapery of winter skies. "That's what I call a Number One raid!"

It was at about this time that entrance was forced to the laboratory by the raiding party. Drake Roscoe,

with a following of six, had scaled higher. He was looking for the lurking place of the Zone spider.

"Help me over the ledge," said Deputy Commissioner Burke.

Respectful aid was given.

Burke found himself, ahead of his squad, in a square room which seemed to have been recently stripped of its more important fittings. Automatic in hand, he looked about him. His torch flashed from wall to wall. Then the others came tumbling in at his heels.

"Laboratory!" somebody said.

"Hullo!" Burke turned. "Back already, Markham?"

"Sure thing, Chief! Your ex-sec. is lodged in cells."

"Good enough. I figure the mayor may be on the pay roll of this corporation. Spread out and search. I don't trust a thing."

They found much to mystify but nothing to help. There was no way out—or no way out that was visible.

"Sound the walls," Burke ordered.

Soundings had commenced when Drake Roscoe came in through the shattered window.

"Hullo, Burke!" he called. "There's no entrance from outside to the top floor."

"Huh!" Burke grunted. "There's no entrance here from inside to *any* dam' floor."

Soundings went on.

"This was where they brewed their poisons," Roscoe went on musingly, looking around him. "Some of the gang have made a getaway, I'm afraid, but we've smashed their base, Burke. And I still have hopes of the room above."

"Here's the shaft, Chief!"

Captain Markham was the speaker.

"Crowbars," Burke growled. "Detail Pinker. He's been in the Navy. That right, Pinker?"

"Right enough, sir."

"Can you swarm up fifteen feet of cable and do a useful job of housebreaking at the top?"

"Say you can't," Roscoe shouted, "and I'll break you in half for the honour of the Service!"

"Watch me, Commander!" Pinker replied.

Crashings and splinterings began.

"There's one bad loss on our books," said Burke. "Madame Czerna made a fade-out with your good-looking boy friend, Stopford!"

"No loss," Roscoe returned shortly. "She was the stepping-stone to everything. If the gang have failed to get her, I'm glad. We owe her all we know, nearly. She has suffered enough. I hope she's safe."

"Stand by, Pinker!" came a cry from Markham. "Here's the shaft! You can squeeze through."

"Good enough," said Pinker. "All ready. What orders, Commander?"

§ IV

When the Page Sutton car reached the barricade, a semi-solid mass of humanity blocked the path. The chauffeur teased a way through. A police officer barred further progress.

"Turn back!" he shouted. "This street is closed."

A grim, choleric face peered out at him, a square-jowled, black-moustached visage familiar to every member of the force.

"Ned Regan!" said a gruff voice. "I'm going to the Scudamore Building."

The Page Sutton car proceeded.

Only police and privileged citizens were to be seen in the street beyond. But a hundred yards farther along they were held up again, by a police captain.

"Who let you through?" this officer demanded.

"*I* let me through!" shouted Ned Regan, glaring into the speaker's eyes with early-morning irritation. "If you don't know Ned Regan you've got to be born again before the world wants you. Count yourself. You'll find you ain't!"

A second time they passed.

And the police captain, his strange compelling eyes fixed upon the face of Molly O'Hay, stood stiffly to attention like a Prussian soldier. A cold smile upon his deathly pale face, he raised his hand in salute.

"Mr. Regan!"

Molly grasped Regan's shoulder.

"What's up?"

"That man we passed . . ."

"The poor mut in a police uniform?"

"He saluted . . ."

"He's crazy anyway."

"But I know him!"

"Sorry about that."

"He was . . . like Napoleon."

"To look at. Not inside."

Molly's friend spoke, for the first time.

"That man, wearing a police captain's uniform, was watching my father's house all last week, Mr. Regan. He's no police officer!"

"What!"

The car stopped jerkily.

"I think"—Molly was so excited as to be almost unintelligible—"he was what Commander Roscoe calls *Head Centre!*"

§ V

When a way was forced into the room with the golden dome, Commander Drake Roscoe, as was fitting, entered first, but warily.

He found himself in a room square, and some ten paces from wall to wall. It seemingly possessed neither doors nor windows. The floor was laid with black and gold oriental tiles upon which some dark, rich rugs were strewn. The walls were decorated sombrely in black and gold.

There were four lamps, unlighted, in tall black tripods, and practically no furniture except a long, narrow antique table—apparently a Communion table—set square centre of the western wall, behind which stood a chair or rather throne.

And in this chair a figure was seated. . . .

The figure was draped in a black gown similar to that of a Master of Arts, and upon the hands were light yellow rubber gloves. These strange hands rested on the table top, the left close to the base of a standard lamp, the right upon a keyboard. There were many queer objects upon the long, narrow table, but no human being entered that room would have had eyes for them. He would have seen nothing but the shadowed face of the one who sat there, silent, motionless.

It was a dead yellow face—the face of a mummy. The eyes appeared superhumanly long, like the eyes of an Egyptian god. The nose was shadowy, indistinct, the mouth a mere slit. The effect was indescribably terrifying until one realized that this yellow horror was a wonderful mask of the same delicate texture as the gloves.

Behind Roscoe, through the forced door of the elevator shaft, came Deputy Commissioner Burke, followed by a dozen police. Torches lighted up the singular room.

There was a moment of electric silence; then:

"Head Centre!" said someone.

The figure at the table was covered by a pound of lead. Roscoe stepped forward. The figure didn't move. He laid his hand upon the black-robed shoulder.

"Go easy, Boss!" came an anxious voice. "I don't trust him even now!"

Roscoe grasped the inert body, drew it forward . . . and cast it back, with a cry of anger.

"The dam' thing's a DUMMY!"

"Hullo, there!" came a deep, gruff voice. "Where's Commander Roscoe?"

"Up here!" cried Markham, craning down the shaft. "Who in hell's that?"

"Ned Regan! Head Centre is out on the street disguised as one of you poor doughnuts!"

In the turmoil that followed Ned Regan's further remarks, mainly insulting, were lost. Women's voices might be heard below. There was evidence to show that Ned W. Regan was coming up.

Then, uncanny, inexplicable, came a sound of silvery laughter!

Regan, mounting laboriously, continued to talk. But in the black and gold room fell a silence of astonishment. The laughter had apparently come from someone among the group . . . But no woman was in the room! Then:

"Is Commander Drake Roscoe there?" demanded a vibrant feminine voice.

Roscoe started, looked around him angrily.

"Who spoke?" he asked.

Amid a deadly silence:

"Great Head Centre speaking," said the arresting tone. "You have delayed my plans, Commander Roscoe, very considerably. New York is vacated temporarily, thanks to you. In fact, I must congratulate you. But, one day, we may meet. I hope I shall win. Great Head Centre speaking."

CHAPTER XX

Some Months Later

§ I

"POINT is," said the captain, "that although I am honoured to place my cabin at your disposal, I can't hold the *Ruritania* in her dock three seconds after one o'clock. It is just twelve-thirty."

Sir Harry Bristol was a charming host. He was also a very truculent specimen of a mercantile skipper.

The Big Politician smiled soothingly. For a big politician he was a small man: but his lined and humorous face conveyed a definite impression of power.

A faint vibration communicated itself to the party assembled in the captain's room. It ceased.

"They're turning the engines over," Sir Harry went on. "My first officer will report inside two minutes. We carry mails and we sail on time." He looked at the clock. "If the missing member isn't here soon, your conference will be a short one, madame and gentlemen."

He glanced around at his guests. They were a notable company: one woman and seven men. The woman was charming: a dainty design for a magazine cover miraculously come to life: one of those elusive creatures commonly supposed to live only in the imagination of artists. The men were: Commander Drake Roscoe, Dr. Stop-

ford, ex-surgeon of the *Ruritania,* Ned W. Regan, most famous private detective outside the pages of Conan Doyle, Deputy Commissioner Burke of Police Headquarters, Page Sutton, one of America's wealthiest citizens, Peter Champion, "the Lumber King" . . . and the Big Politician.

To a deaf man with a blind eye it must have been apparent that this conference in the captain's room of the *Ruritania* was no more excuse for conviviality.

"I appreciate your position entirely, Sir Harry——" said the politician.

He was interrupted by a rap on the cabin door.

"Yes?" cried the captain.

The door opened. The first officer, standing in a shadowy alleyway, saluted, and:

"O.K., sir," he reported laconically.

"Very good. Carry on, Mr. Graham."

The first officer withdrew, closing the door, whereupon:

"You understand, Captain," said Regan, his voice more than ordinarily gruff by reason of repressed excitement, "that this party couldn't have assembled in any other place. Two of us are booked to sail. You know how we got aboard. You know how we aim to get ashore. This is a British ship and unless they bomb us we can reckon we're safe here from the Zones."

"That is, for another twenty-five minutes."

"The criminal known as the Emperor of America is operating in New York again," said Peter Champion, and brought down a large gnarled fist on to the chair arm. "It's costing me and Page Sutton a big piece of money to buy the information we're expecting to-night.

But we have suffered enough. So has all the country."

"Excuse me buttin' in," said Stopford, "on such scanty information. But this sportsman who seems to have been unavoidably detained—how does he come to be at large? I've been away from your peaceful country. My impression was that there'd been a big bust-up of the gang, with long terms of imprisonment and what not."

"Some of the worst of the bunch slipped through," Burke explained, removing a vast cigar from one corner of his grim mouth and gazing reflectively at the cone of ash. "The newspaper reports you read in Europe didn't lay undue stress on this point. They're operating again. We've established touch several times."

"It seems to me . . ." Stopford murmured.

He ceased speaking. There came a loud rap on the door. It was thrown open.

A big man, heavily muffled, his hat brim pulled down to shade his face, burst into the cabin.

§ II

In a vault which must have suggested to one entering it that he had been translated to mediæval Spain, a horrible figure was seated. The vault, which appeared to have been hewn out of living rock, was roughly oval in shape; it was in fact a natural cavern artificially perfected. The rock composing its walls and roof was dark green serpentine; so dark that it appeared black, having been refined to a glossy surface.

A central column seemingly upheld the roof. Actually, it was part of the virgin rock, but had been most

exquisitely fashioned. It resembled the trunk of a date palm, and on the vaulted ceiling it spread out six geometrical branches which conformed to the curves of the gleaming walls and were caught up and supported by six slender pillars. The floor, slightly uneven, was uncarpeted and composed of polished serpentine.

Arched doorways, uncurtained, showed dead black against the sea-green of the walls left and right; and slightly east of the central pillar another gaped ominous, like the mouth of Moloch, at the eastern end of the vault.

A greenish but adequate light pervaded the place. Its source was not apparent. Somewhere—evidently a long way off—as though echoed and reëchoed through innumerable caverns, a sound of falling water was audible.

Except for a long and narrow table set before the western wall and a high-backed Spanish chair ornamented with stamped leather, there was no furniture.

In this chair the solitary figure was seated.

Strange enough the vault—a serpentine bubble, a geological phenomenon in the bowels of Manhattan—the figure who occupied the place was stranger yet.

On the western side of the central column a speck of red light glowed. From none of the shadowy entrances did anyone enter the vault. But a clear voice, as that of someone standing by the table, spoke.

"H.Q.," said the voice. "Report of Divisional Chief C, in charge of party covering Divisional Chief B. The latter, Robert Macrae, leaving B Headquarters in charge of subordinate, proceeded at ten minutes after midnight to the *Ruritania*. He is now aboard. According

to orders he was covered but not detained. Zone Officer 3 C has remained aboard. Standing by on boat deck for instructions. Group Master 2, Sector 3 C 2, and Group Master 4, Sector 2 D 1, detailed for special duty, also remain on board, in charge of Zone officer. Party in captain's cabin as before. Report ends."

"Report," directed the musical voice of the masked man, "of H.Q. patrol covering Divisional Chief C."

"Report just to hand. H.Q. patrol confirms. Report ends."

The snappy nasal voice was that of one self-confident and undismayed. The masked man spoke again.

"Your reports are unsatisfactory," he said, and his modulated tones spoke as through ice. "If I desire you to condense them I shall order it. Unless I do so, make all reports in detail. This is an official reprimand. Do not repeat the report of H.Q. patrol. Give me that of Group master covering *Ruritania* from the river, *as received.*"

"To hand." The nasal tones were less confident. "Group Master 1, Sector 3 C 1, reports that all other visitors are now ashore. All mails aboard. Dock quiet. *Ruritania's* engines have been turned over. Chief officer at station. First officer at station. All set for pulling out. Timed 12:41. Report ends."

Silence fell in the sea-black vault, broken only by that sound of distant falling water; then:

"Instruct Zone Officer 3 C," said the musical voice, "to place Group masters detailed for special duty at selected points commanding port-side portholes of commander's cabin. Zone officer will be held responsible if both fail. Advise Zone officer. Immediately Divisional

Chief B is removed from the rolls, Zone officer and Group masters will report to Divisional Chief C, personally. Move."

The speck of red light gleaming evilly against the green black of the pillar went out. Only that distant sound of falling water broke the silence. Then, very faintly, came a low rumbling. It died away.

Across the polished surface of the table one long, flexible yellow hand moved. It rested for a moment on a switchboard.

The vault became plunged in darkness.

§ III

"The only thing I have got to worry about," said the man who had burst into Sir Harry Bristol's room, "is this: Have I covered my tracks?"

Dr. Stopford replaced his monocle, which he had been burnishing, and:

"From the spots of information I've been able to pick up about the Zone people," he replied, breaking a dramatic silence during which the party watched intently the last speaker, "I should say definitely and positively, No!"

"I agree with you," Macrae declared. "I've fallen for a price that would buy almost any man. But I'm doubting if I'll live to spend the money."

The captain broke in amiably:

"As I gather," said he, "that a proportion of this committee is not sailing in the ship, it appears to me"—glancing at the clock—"that you have roughly seventeen minutes in which to earn the price to which you refer."

He swung his chair around and stood up. He bowed to Madame Czerna and then turned to the politician.

"Duty calls," he explained. "Necessary orders have been given, and you will be warned three minutes before the ship sails. Please excuse me. Good-night, Roscoe. Good-night, Stopford. My steward is in attendance if you require anything."

He bowed again very stiffly, and went out.

"The Old Man's fed up," Stopford murmured. "What in the name of glory ever brought me back to this murder business?" He resumed his seat and turned to the charming woman occupying the adjoining chair. "Was it my fault or yours?"

"Mine, I think," she confessed, and every man in the room thought her accent adorable. "I am sorry. But yet"—she hesitated—"perhaps we can be of use."

"Say it quick, Macrae," Peter Champion burst in, exchanging a glance with Roscoe. "The commander, here, has a lot of questions to put to you. Suppose you just place yourself at his disposal."

Without waiting for confirmation from the informer, Drake Roscoe stood up and faced Macrae.

"We won't waste time," said he tersely. "You are Robert Macrae, representative of a number of European newspapers and also Divisional chief of the organization known as the Zones."

"That's right."

"Show me your badge."

Macrae, a tall, gaunt figure, very bald, and with haunted, tawny eyes, threw back the lapel of his coat. Diamonds glittered. Seven pairs of eyes became focussed

upon the device pinned to his coat: a large diamond D upon an onyx shield.

"You have undertaken," said Roscoe crisply, "to furnish evidence which will enable us to clean up the Zone group. What is this evidence?"

Amid a tense silence—for everyone in the cabin recognized the value of time—Macrae took from his pocket something wrapped in tissue paper. Unwrapping the paper, he put upon the captain's table a duplicate badge.

"Paste," he explained. "But no one will challenge it. My own I daren't part with yet, for obvious reasons. I figure I'm one of four, but I can't be sure. Under me I have three Zone officers, nine Sector captains and thirty-six Group masters with operatives. *Over* me I have Head Centre. I don't know Head Centre—what he really looks like, I mean. But he knows me. I know my three Zone officers. They know me. I know my Sector captains—but they don't know me! I don't know who's in charge of the other Divisions. But the power of this badge holds good all over the city."

"What d'you mean?" Page Sutton demanded.

"I mean that this badge gives me authority over all Zone officials below rank of chief, whatever Division they belong to."

"I see!" Drake Roscoe murmured and studied the duplicate badge which he held in his hand. "You mean that *anybody,* wearing this badge, could obtain control of the Zones?"

"Sure!"

Roscoe turned to Madame Czerna, and:

"Does this look familiar to you?" he asked, and held up the diamond D.

Madame's charming face perceptibly paled and her eyes seemed to grow abnormally large; but, following a moment of indecision:

"It is the badge of a Divisional chief," she replied composedly.

Macrae stared hard.

"How do you know?" he challenged.

"I was once a Zone officer," Madame explained, composure quite regained under the stimulus of Stopford's reassuring hand-squeeze. "I had charge of Zone 2 A. That was before the big raid."

Macrae looked around him, smiling in wry fashion.

"Are there any more of us here?" he asked.

"No," said Roscoe shortly. "Get busy. Time is short. Listen. Have you any reason to suppose that there is a big political plot being hatched by Head Centre?"

"Yes. But I don't know what it is."

The politician was watching the speaker fascinatedly.

"Have you reason to believe that there are yet higher officials than Head Centre?"

"No. He's the boss."

"How d'you know?"

"I don't know. But whereas Zone officers are sometimes put through direct to Head Centre, a Divisional chief is never put through to anybody above. That's why I figure he's in control."

"Reasonable but wrong," Stopford murmured.

"Let me get the facts clear," Roscoe went on. "You are supposed to be aboard this ship to-night on Zone business?"

"I am. My passage to Cherbourg is booked."

"You are supposed to leave before the ship sails?"

"I am. My baggage is to go on."

"What is your official business on the ship?"

"Now we're coming to it!" said Macrae grimly. "There's some very important move bein made tonight." He looked around the party significantly. "I don't know if it's you, Mr. Champion, or Mr. Page Sutton, or——"

The Big Politician smiled, and:

"Or me!" he added dryly. "But I gather, Mr.—er—Macrae, that when a Divisional chief is employed personally there's an extra big push coming?"

"Precisely," Macrae confirmed.

"What are your further orders?" Roscoe rapped.

"To stand by in my stateroom."

"What!" Stopford exclaimed.

"You forget," said Madame Czerna. "All officers of the Zones are in constant touch with Head Centre."

"X Radio!" Roscoe was the speaker. "We got several instruments in the big round-up. No electrician in the United States has so far been able to explain their construction. I take it you carry one?"

"A new issue," was the reply. "The present X Radio is an advance on the old one. Morse is done away with. It operates like a telephone!"

From his breast pocket he drew out what looked like a cigar case, when:

"Madame and gentlemen!" a voice cried, "in the circumstances I can only apologize, but——"

All eyes were turned to the doorway.

The captain had come in. He was wearing his bridge

kit and had obviously been called down. He was accompanied by a strangely beautiful woman. A sable cloak sheathed her like a chrysalis. Beneath it, her slim, black-clad legs, gray by reason of the skin gleaming through the silk, and black shoes with their diamond buckles made a harmony of delicate curves.

Her neck and what was visible of her shoulders seemed supernaturally white against the sable. The slim hand with which she held the cloak carried on its index finger a large diamond ring of peculiar design. Her hair was worn low on her neck. It was blue-black. She had straight, narrow eyebrows and extraordinarily luminous, darkly fringed eyes.

Everybody stood up. Roscoe bowed, and his bow was coldly returned. The newcomer was staring at Madame Czerna.

"The Duchesse de Greuze," Sir Harry explained, "who is sailing with us, has discovered a most serious loss. My room telephone is connected with shore. I hate to disturb you. But the wardroom, along the alleyway, is empty."

As the party proceeded along the alleyway:

"The Old Man would let anything go to hell at any time," Stopford murmured in Roscoe's ear, "for a pretty woman. I except his ship."

"Duchesse de Greuze," said Roscoe, as they filed into the wardroom behind Peter Champion and Page Sutton. "She used to be a De la Haye before the old duc married her . . ."

He ceased. Stopford had pulled up as Madame Czerna's hand rested urgently on his shoulder.

"That woman!" she whispered, and her eyes were wide and startled again. "She remembered me!"

"What!" Roscoe exclaimed.

"I met her in Paris—years ago. She knows . . . my true history."

Stopford pressed her arm reassuringly.

"Don't worry," he said. "There're lots of us to look after you!"

"Go in," Roscoe said in a low voice. "I'll join you in two minutes."

"What——" Stopford began.

"Do as I say," Roscoe insisted. "We have only a few minutes left."

He turned and disappeared along the alleyway. Captain Sir Harry Bristol had regained the bridge when Roscoe quietly opened the door of his cabin.

The Duchesse de Greuze had replaced the 'phone receiver on its hook. From a small bag which she carried she had taken a tiny, exquisite instrument and set it on the table before her.

Roscoe cautiously craned forward to obtain a better view. A heavy footstep sounded in the alleyway.

CHAPTER XXI

"Removed from the Rolls"

§ I

In a dark cavern deep in the bowels of Manhattan a section of a curious map was illuminated. It showed the streets leading to and immediately surrounding the docks used by the big Western ocean passenger lines. The vague light shining through the coloured sections of the map dimly revealed a black-robed figure behind a long table.

There was a sound of distant falling water.

Above the map section a spot of red light suddenly showed itself. The map disappeared, as:

"H.Q.," said a nasal voice. "Divisional Chief D reports from the Ambassador Hotel that great Head Centre orders immediate call X and direct connection. Urgent. Report ends."

"Disconnect," the masked man replied.

Perhaps from his tone the unseen subordinate might have deduced that Head Centre was excited. But there was nothing in the musical voice to have told any listener not intimate with the speaker that he was moved in any way.

The red light disappeared.

A faint sound of sparkling came from the long table. A tiny speck of green light sprang to life under the yellow hand manipulating a keyboard.

"Head Centre, New York," said the musical voice.

A woman replied. The tones were not so clear as those of the last speaker. It was as though the woman spoke from a neighbouring room.

"Great Head Centre," she said. "Alteration of plan on *Ruritania*. Porthole captain's cabin not practicable. Reprimand Divisional Chief C. Centre operations on boat deck, port side, aft of captain's cabin. Act immediately. You are now responsible in person. Reinforce units covering. Officers engaged are endangered. Move."

The speck of green light disappeared. Instantly the red light leaped up on the shadowy pillar, and:

"H.Q.," said the nasal voice.

"Instruct Divisional Chief C," came an immediate order, "to reinforce units covering dock area. All Sectors from West Thirteenth and West Fourteenth streets to Fifth Avenue must be open. This is a general emergency order. Instruct Zone Officer 3 C to place Group masters detailed for special duty at selected points on port side of boat deck and to supervise in person. In the event of failure, Zone Officer 3 C will if necessary follow firing routine and take to the river. Advise Group master covering. Divisional Chief C will then report to me, personally. Move."

The red light went out.

§ II

Drake Roscoe returned along the alleyway, cursing under his breath. Fortunately, he was fairly familiar with the ship, and having successfully dodged the cap-

tain's steward he now headed again toward the cabin.

But he was wasting priceless time. Things he wanted to know—*must* know—were being told in the wardroom by the renegade Divisional chief. If his instinct should prove to be wrong, he was blundering badly. And it was sheer instinct, or inspiration, which had whispered to him that the telephone call of the Duchesse de Greuze was more important than any revelation Macrae had to make.

So far, he had not gathered a word. But now, as he approached the door, he could hear her clear voice. . . . "Officers engaged!" (two or three words which were unintelligible) . . . "Move!"

Silence followed. Whereupon Roscoe rapped sharply and opened the door.

The Duchesse stood up from the table, holding her cloak about her. She had apparently just closed her handbag. But Roscoe concluded that this meant that she had been using a powder puff.

"A thousand apologies!" he exclaimed. "Please don't let me interrupt you. But I think I left a notebook on the captain's table!"

The woman's dark eyes watched him inscrutably as he crossed and pretended to search.

"No apology is necessary, Commander," she murmured. "I have learned what I wanted to know. And I fear I must hurry ashore!"

"What!" Roscoe exclaimed, and looked up.

"My rope of pearls—they are historic, you know—was left behind at my hotel . . . and they have disappeared!"

"But—what shall you do?"

She watched him composedly, yet with an odd concentration. Now she smiled. And the smile lent to the cold, proud face a new beauty, because it was so unexpected.

"I shall go ashore," she replied. "I don't dare to face my husband without the Greuze pearls! My baggage my maid will take care of and see ashore at Cherbourg."

"Really, Duchesse, you have my sympathy! I dare not offer to assist in any way. My own affairs demand all my attention. But if I may call, later, I feel sure I could be of use."

"Thank you. I should welcome it. I am at the Ambassador."

She held out her slender hand. For some reason Drake found himself thinking of Miladi of *The Three Musketeers*. He stooped, and lightly kissed the tapered, fingers, then:

"Forgive my apparent rudeness," he said, "but I must go!"

He turned and raced back to the wardroom. As he burst in:

"Ssh!"

Stopford grasped his arm. Madame Czerna raised a finger to her lips, and:

"X Radio!" Burke whispered. "Quiet!"

Robert Macrae was seated at a table. Before him rested the tiny instrument contained in the cigar case. He depressed a button on top of the case, and:

"H.Q.," said a nasal voice—apparently in the wardroom!

Raising a warning hand:

"Division B," Macrae replied.

"Your report—quickly!"

"Now in my cabin. Party assembled remains the same but now in wardroom. Have not been put in touch with any other officer aboard. Standing by. Urgent. Timed 12:53."

"Proceed at once to the boat deck," directed the nasal voice. "Cross to the rail—port side—between two boats. A Zone officer will then meet you. Head Centre's orders. Move. Disconnect."

Macrae released the button, closed the case, and thrust it back in his pocket. He stood up.

"I must carry out my orders," he said. "Otherwise I should be of no further use to you! If you follow me, Mr. Burke or Mr. Regan, keep out of sight. If my Zone duties take me ashore, wait my call later to-night. I shall call *you,* Mr. Champion. Stand by at home!"

He hurried from the room.

Roscoe exchanged a lightning glance with Stopford and went after him.

"Cover me, Regan!" he snapped.

Ned Regan grunted and followed Roscoe out.

Down in the second-class accommodations a very excited young fifth officer was escorting the lovely Duchesse de Greuze through piles of baggage and knots of wrangling humanity to where a solitary gangplank still connected the *Ruritania* with shore. This phenomenon was due to captain's orders. Nobody knew why those orders had been given.

The fifth, glancing at his dazzling companion, drew conclusions flattering to Sir Harry but undreamed of in his philosophy.

Someone was coming up the gangway.

"Stand away there!" roared the fifth. "Go back!"

"I'm Captain Markham from Police Headquarters."

"I don't care if you're the President from Washington. Get off that plank!"

Markham hesitated. But the promising young officer won. He saluted the duchesse, and:

"Allow me to precede you, Madame," he said. "You may stumble."

The dock gained safely:

"If you're from Police Headquarters," said the ship's officer to Markham, "you can do a useful job. This lady is the Duchesse de Greuze. She has lost historic pearls from her hotel. Tip off the customs people and see she's taken care of. She's returning to her hotel."

Police Captain Markham glared for a moment. Then he saluted the fair passenger.

"At your service," he said, "although my time's short."

The duchesse extended her hand to the fifth officer.

"Thank you," she said, and smiled.

And as he turned on the gangplank to look back, a frightful scream came from high up in the ship. It rose shrilly . . . and ceased suddenly.

§ III

A spot of red light, like the eye of some hidden animal, glowed in the serpentine darkness below Manhattan.

"H.Q.," announced a nasal voice. "Report of Group Master 1, Sector 3 C 1, covering *Ruritania* from river.

Zone Officer 3 C swam aboard. Group Master 4, Sector 2 D 1, also swam to the boat. Group Master 2, Sector 3 C 2 is unreported so far. *Ruritania* pulling out. Timed 1 A.M. Report ends."

"Report of Zone Officer 3 C."

"To hand. Divisional Chief B was removed from the rolls at 12:54. Zone officer operated in person on boat deck, covered by Group Master 2, Sector 3 C 2, now missing. Report ends."

"Report of Divisional Chief C."

"To hand. The Duchesse de Greuze came ashore six minutes before ship sailed. She has proceeded to Ambassador Hotel. Group master covering. Number One came ashore less than a minute before sailing. He has proceeded to his home. No cover. He was accompanied by Ned W. Regan and Deputy Commissioner Burke. Page Sutton and Peter Champion sail with ship as notified. Dr. Stopford and Madame Czerna have also sailed. Commander Drake Roscoe remained on board. Divisional Chief C on his way to H.Q. Timed 1:05. Report ends."

Instantly came an order:

"Cover Number One and party. Advise Divisional Chief D. File quarter-hourly reports of movements of Ned W. Regan and Commissioner Burke. Zone Officer 3 C is responsible for Group Master 2, Sector 3 C 2, unreported. Advise Zone officer. Instruct Group master in charge seaplane G await *Ruritania's* dropping pilot and report. Divisional Chief C to be admitted by Entrance Two. Move."

The red light went out.

§ IV

"What makes you think there's a man overboard?" the purser asked irritably.

"Well," said his second, eyeing a whisky bottle, "four people have said so. A couple of deck hands report that *two* men went overboard a minute before we pulled out."

"Making three!" growled the purser. "Any more trouble?"

"Yes. The Duchesse de Greuze went ashore at the last moment. Her maid's left in charge of her gear."

"Hell!" said the purser. "But it doesn't matter anyway. We're crowded. We can do with more accommodation."

"What about seeing the Old Man?"

"That be damned for a tale," said the purser. "Wait till we're at sea." He caught the direction of his junior's glance, and: "If you're thirsty," he added, "we make Ambrose Light at 2:05."

The junior purser went out.

Up in the wardroom:

"That poor devil had a premonition of what was coming to him," said Roscoe. "Later, we can tabulate what we've learned . . . because we'll learn no more, from *him*."

"You mean he was murdered?" said Peter Champion hoarsely.

Madame Czerna spoke listlessly. She was very pale.

"I *knew* he would be murdered," she said.

"Cheery ho!" Stopford murmured, and poured out a bottle of Bass which had thoughtlessly been left in a

cupboard by someone unacquainted with the strict liquor regulations. "Thank heaven the sea's smooth! I was never much good on a loose ladder, and it's beastly for ladies."

"Position is," said Page Sutton bitterly, "that Champion and myself have already lost millions to this Zone gang. Now they're covering us again. We're fugitives in our own country. When we get ashore, what do we do?"

"Remains to be seen," Roscoe answered dryly. "You're by no means alone. This thing certainly hits individuals, but do you know what it's really aimed at?"

"No."

Peter Champion was the speaker.

"At the nation! For to-night, I'll count my job done when you *are* ashore. Bristol has agreed to use his lights. It's black as pitch outside."

"The ship shouldn't have sailed," Page Sutton broke in, "considering——"

"Considerin' what?" Stopford interrupted. "Maybe there was murder. Righty ho. It was in territorial water. It's a police job. This is a Royal Mail steamer. I know. I used to be surgeon before Liverpool fired me. Take my advice, and focus on forthcomin' business with loose ladder."

There was no moon, and a long oily swell stirred the sea when the *Ruritania* dropped her pilot.

Only a few passengers witnessed the event.

Stopford went down the ladder first, followed by a slender boy whose trousers didn't seem to fit too well. Gauzy frocks and high-heeled shoes are no sort of kit

for this kind of work, and Madame Czerna had availed herself of Stopford's wardrobe.

Then came the pilot and a couple of hands with baggage. Next, Page Sutton managed to transfer without accident.

Peter Champion was standing at the head of the ladder, hesitating, when the ship's searchlight suddenly came to life and swept the dark, heaving breast of the ocean.

"Pilot just leaving, sir," said the officer supervising and well aware that time was valuable. Then:

"Follow me, Mr. Champion," came a peremptory voice. "Watch your step."

Roscoe appeared out of the shadows and went over on to the ladder.

"Can I be of any assistance, sir?" the ship's officer asked.

Peter Champion grinned wryly.

"Thanks all the same," said he. "I guess I can make it!"

On the bridge:

"Pilot away, sir," somebody reported.

But Sir Harry Bristol and two of his officers were focussing their glasses on a seaplane which, as the lights picked her up, had skimmed swiftly westward, and now, pursued by the white beam, was taking the air.

Bristol turned.

"Log that," he directed.

He gave the signal which meant in effect:

"All out for Cherbourg."

CHAPTER XXII

A Gala Night

§ I

The door of a dreary-looking house on an East Side street opened in response to the ringing of the bell. A man entered and the door was closed quickly. There was no light in the lobby. As the car in which he had arrived drove off westward:

"H.Q.," said the new arrival. "Anything to report?"

"No."

The second voice speaking out of the stuffy darkness might have been that of an Italian.

"Stand by," the first directed.

There was a sound of movement. A door was opened and closed. Then, the man who had just arrived switched up a light in the room which he had entered.

It was a truly filthy living room. It reeked of that oily uncleanliness which characterizes certain streets in Naples and other Italian cities.

The newcomer looked about him briefly. He wore evening kit covered by a light evercoat, and a soft black hat. His pale features had a Napoleonic contour.

Finding the room empty, he quitted it by a door at the farther end and descended a dark staircase with which he seemed to be familiar. As he depressed a switch another room, semi-subterranean, was revealed.

It was indescribably stuffy. He crossed it, went out, and descended yet lower, coming now to a dilapidated cellar containing a furnace, coal, tins, rubbish, and other impedimenta.

At this point he changed his procedure. He locked and bolted the cellar door. Then he examined the place in detail, not as one searching for someone hidden, but as a detective looking for clues. Apparently satisfied at last, he crossed to the northeast corner of the place and an odd thing happened. Some rapid manipulation resulted in a section of board littered with all sorts of débris sliding noiselessly away, revealing below a flight of wooden steps.

Throwing the light of a torch upon these, the man in evening dress descended. The flight of steps was short and at the bottom he paused. Some other mechanism was manipulated and the trap above his head closed as noiselessly as it had opened. A passage revealed itself ahead of him. Its course was due west. It was roughly hewn and timbered in the manner of a mine-cutting. He pursued it for perhaps twenty yards to where it terminated at the head of another flight of steps. He descended these. They were twenty in number. A short southeasterly passage of similar character led to a natural opening, V-shaped, a fissure in the rock, apparently dark-gray gneiss upon which this section of New York rested.

He was now in a natural tunnel which at places seemed to have been artificially enlarged. It was at no point more than five feet in height and sometimes lower, but it was always wide enough to allow of the passage of a man. Sometimes streaks of granite and felspar glit-

tered in the ray of the torch, or ribbons of quartz threw out sparkling scintillations suggesting hidden treasure. The passage descended. It wound serpentine fashion and finally came to an end before a massively constructed steel door.

Of this door the man held a key. He unlocked it: entered. He locked it behind him.

Fully half an hour had elapsed, however, before a figure wearing a black robe took his seat in a high-backed Spanish chair, ornamented with stamped leather, behind a long, narrow table set before the western wall of a green-black vault having a central column which seemingly upheld the roof, gleaming serpentine walls, and an uneven, uncarpeted, polished floor.

A ghastly yellow mask and rubber gloves of the same smooth substance effectually disguised his identity. One of the flexible yellow hands manipulated a keyboard. A man wearing a black half mask entered through an arched doorway on the right, bowed, and stood still. A further manipulation and a similar figure entered from the left. A third entered behind the first and a fourth behind the second. Then:

"Divisional chiefs," said the musical voice of the mummy-like creature: "Number."

They obeyed in oddly varied tones:

"A."

"B."

"C."

"D."

"Division B," continued the uncanny president, "you are newly appointed, and your first Divisional duty will

be an important one. To-morrow night, all Divisions will be concentrated upon the Broadway area. It is because of the importance of this operation that you are here in person. The Zones require new capital. To-morrow night we shall acquire it!"

§ II

Dr. Stopford paced the room restlessly. One well acquainted with the ex-surgeon of the *Ruritania* might have noted an unfamiliar tension in a man usually so composed.

Drake Roscoe, from a chair at the table in which he was seated, watched him.

"I asked you to come back, Stoppy," he said, almost apologetically, "and to bring Madame Czerna, because I feel that her knowledge of the Zones is really invaluable."

"Splendid!" said Stopford, taking out his cigarette case. "But I want to marry her an' settle down, an' all that domestic stuff. I've got a nice little practice in view in Norfolk, England, and you've lugged me back into the middle of all this murder piffle. Oh! I'm not grousin', Roscoe. I know the thing's too big for a man to grouse. But you know how I feel about her."

"I know every time," Roscoe replied warmly. "It was fine of you to come. She is safe enough at the moment, but I admit——"

Stopford finished the sentence for him.

"That her future prospects are pretty bloodsome," said he.

Roscoe nodded, smiling grimly.

"We thought," he went on, "that the New York Zones, at any rate, had been cleaned up. We raided their headquarters, with its mass of secret passages, elevators, laboratories, and so forth. It was only then, Stoppy, that we learned the truth. The Zones are not confined to New York City. There are Zones in *every* city! We smashed one Head Centre. There are heaven knows how many other Head Centres. And there's a *Great Head Centre* controlling the lot of 'em! They have been quiet for a while. They are active again."

"So it seems," said Stopford dryly, holding up his monocle and gazing through it, prior to burnishing.

"We are on the eve of a Presidential election," Roscoe continued, "and I think the Zones will be taking a hand."

"Cheery ho!" Stopford murmured; and having successfully burnished his monocle he replaced it with skill. "What about me sailin' in the mornin'?"

Roscoe stood up and rested his hand upon the speaker's shoulder.

"You know you won't go," he said quietly. "I am asking a hell of a lot, old man, because of Fée—I know that. But I know something else. You won't refuse and you won't go."

They confronted each other for a moment.

"No!" Stopford murmured. "It's damned funny—but I suppose I won't!"

"They have established new headquarters," said Roscoe. "God knows where! But it's my job to find out. The thing I thought was dead is alive again, and buzzing. The Zones are active. Head Centre is back, the

spider in the centre of the web. Meanwhile, look at this."

He tossed a note upon the table. Stopford bent over it, read, and then:

"An invitation from the Duchesse de Greuze," he murmured, "to join her in her box at the Roxane Theatre on Sunday for the gala performance in honour of the King of Turkestan. Charmin' woman! I take it you'll go?"

"I shall certainly go," Roscoe returned grimly. "And I admit she's a charming woman. But——" he paused, and stared significantly at Stopford.

"But what?" the latter demanded.

"Nothing!" Roscoe returned to his seat at the table. "Except that I don't trust a soul in my own country, Stoppy, now that the size of this organization is beginning to dawn upon me."

"Thousands of cheers," said Stopford. "How good it is to be alive! How mornin' by mornin' we leap from our beds with a glad cry! Indeed the gods smile on the United States of America, and I rejoice to find myself in so peaceful a spot. Re Sunday night, what are your brainy suggestions?"

"I'm groping in the dark," Roscoe confessed. "To put it bluntly, I don't trust the Duchesse de Greuze. But the Zones have never hitherto attempted open assassination. They have always covered themselves. I mean, I don't think I'm in any danger of being shot in a box at the Roxane Theatre. But I have an uneasy notion that there's something afoot regarding the King of Turkestan."

"What on earth d'you mean?"

"Well, I mean this: Apart from the fact that his wife carries on her person a small fortune in jewellery, this gala performance will bring to the theatre other displays by ladies on the social register scarcely less noteworthy. The ultimate aims of the Zones we *don't* know, but that they are pirates, we *do* know. They have to get money. You and I have seen them getting it."

"Somewhat. In a small way."

"We know something of their methods. The performance on Sunday is a tempting opportunity. I'm scared. His Majesty of Turkestan is in charge of Police Headquarters. His every movement is covered by a fleet of detectives. The arrangements for Sunday are elaborate. Burke has shown them to me. It will be impossible to move in the Roxane Theatre without jostling a detective. Nevertheless, I'm uneasy."

"It occurs to me, also," said Stopford, "that you're a bit crazy. You're rather anticipatin' things."

"Perhaps I am," Roscoe conceded.

"But," Stopford went on, "rememberin' that the Zones are primarily a predatory organization, I can see the danger. But I don't admit that it's any part of *your* young troubles."

"It isn't!" said Roscoe, jumping up excitedly. "I might have overlooked it! But for . . ." he pointed to the letter of invitation lying upon the table.

"Deeper and deeper!" Stopford murmured. " 'Like lead the quicksand clung to his sinkin' limbs.' I'm defeated, Roscoe. I can't follow you. Let's tabulate your suspicions. You believe the Duchesse de Greuze—absurd idea—to be associated with the Zones. Don't answer me.

Let me purge myself in spoken thought. I can see this fatuous possibility. She invites you to join her in her box at a certain entertainment. If there was any funny business contemplated at this entertainment, you're about the last bloke in New York one of the gang would invite. I trust I make myself intelligible?"

"You do," said Roscoe, laughing, and, in laughter, his grim face became the face of a schoolboy. "But the Zones never do the obvious thing, Stoppy!"

"I don't suppose you'll see eye to eye with me in this," said Stopford, "because you are not in love. But the first point that occurs to me is Fée. All the time you're talkin'—although I'm tryin' to be with you, and meanin' to be helpful—I'm thinkin' of her."

Roscoe turned to him impulsively.

"Don't be so sure, old man," he said. "Perhaps I *do* understand. And all you do in the circumstances I appreciate most highly."

"Good!" Stopford murmured; "that's reasonable. In short, if you think there's goin' to be dirty work at the gala performance, Fée is out. Is that a bet?"

"No!" said Roscoe. "I'm sorry. But it isn't!"

CHAPTER XXIII

Performance Begins

§ I

THE red light on the serpentine pillar glowed fiercely. The masked man remained motionless in his chair. In the dim green light he looked utterly inhuman.

"H.Q.," said a nasal voice. "Report of Divisional Chief D. Plans complete for concentrating all units upon Sector 2 D 1 to-night. Sector Captain 1 D 3 detailed for special duty has established touch with other Sector captains. His report is expected at any moment. Everything in order. Report ends."

A moment of silence followed, then:

"Report," directed the musical voice, "of Zone officer covering box office, Roxane Theatre."

"Report to hand," came a prompt reply. "Arrangements not yet fully completed. No addition to list of seat-holders other than those notified earlier this morning. All box parties accounted for except that of the Duchesse de Greuze. Report ends. Timed 3:15."

"Report of Zone officer covering the Duchesse de Greuze."

"No report to hand."

"Report of Group master covering Ambassador Hotel."

"To hand. The Duchesse is in her apartment, as last notified. Report ends. Timed 3:10."

"Stand by for a General Emergency Order," the commanding voice directed. "Disconnect. Connect the chief chemist."

The red light went out, but almost immediately a blue one sprang into life beside the spot where it had been, and:

"Laboratory," someone announced.

"Report to me here, personally, at once."

§ II

"I disapprove entirely," said Stopford. His mask of facetiousness was discarded; he was grimly earnest. "Fée and I came back to New York at her request, but contrary to my own wishes. She feels that she owes your country a debt. Perhaps she's right. She knows quite a lot about this Zone gang. Agreed. She's open to help —up to a point——"

"Please!" Madame Czerna laid her hand upon the speaker's arm, checking him.

Stopford paused, looking at her.

She was worth looking at in these days. Happiness makes women radiant. And a woman's happiness is to be loved—by the right man. Into Madame's stormy life the frank adoration of this clean Englishman with his unspoiled ideals had burst like a spring in a desert reputed arid.

"I could never be happy," she went on, clasping his hand, "and no more could you, if I left anything not done that I could do to defeat these murderers."

Drake Roscoe stood up, glancing doubtfully out of the window. The apartment was on the fourteenth floor, with all of a big city square in front of it. Yet he was dubious. He distrusted the very air of New York. More than once he thought he had detected a suspicious glitter in a distant window.

"Let's review the facts," said he, facing the seated pair. "The Zone group, my dear Fée—Stoppy doesn't mind me calling you Fée!—got you away from Devil's Island. Since you had never committed any crime beyond joining your late husband there, this was merely charitable. But it gave them a hold on you. Right!" He banged his fist on a table. "That's finished!"

"What do you mean?" Stopford asked.

"Do you imagine," Roscoe returned, "that this country of mine is so ungrateful that it doesn't remember services rendered? The case of Fée has been taken up by Washington. She's at liberty to return to France at any time she wishes—with your permission!"

"Oh!" the woman whispered, and hid her face in her hands.

"Roscoe!" said Stopford, and jumped up. "I haven't a scrap of doubt about the gratitude of good old Washington, but . . . you worthy scout! You sound egg! Damn! I've dropped my glass!"

He searched for it at length, while Roscoe stared out of the window and Madame Czerna surreptitiously powdered her nose and peeped at herself in a little mirror to see if unfamiliar tears had played havoc with her appearance. At last:

"I cannot thank you," she said unsteadily. "I should cry . . . and look freekish. But . . ."

"Found!" cried Stopford, and stood up burnishing his monocle. "I agree!" He clapped his hand on Roscoe's shoulder. "She'll be there to-night, old chap. I think we can take care of her."

"Thank you!" said Madame Czerna—and somehow found her hand clasped in Stopford's. "You always understand."

"Now," cried Roscoe crisply, "forgetting all these personal matters, here's the box-office plan of the Roxane Theatre." He spread it out on the table. "Red crosses indicate unknown seat-holders. The others correspond to the list which I have here. As I understand, Fée, that you know some twenty-odd members of the Zones by sight, I suggest that you occupy orchestra stall 14 in Row F. You will be in the midst of a perfect squadron of red crosses!"

All three bent over the plan.

"Here is the box of the Duchesse de Greuze," Roscoe went on, "where I shall be—in full view of your seat. Now"—he took her hand—"you are wearing a very beautiful ring . . ."

"Thanks," said Stopford.

"I suggest, as you know Morse . . ."

He ceased. Madame Czerna had withdrawn her hand. Then:

"Don't be angry," she whispered. "Yes! I know it, Morse. It belongs to what I had hoped to forget. But I understand. I am to signal to you which of the people I can see belonging to the Zones? How will you know which I mean?"

"Quite," Stopford murmured. "That's a snag."

"No snag," Roscoe assured him. "Fée will simply

flash: 'Orchestra 7, Row D' and I shall know she means that the occupant of this seat is a member of the Zones."

"Pause," said Stopford. "Listen to reason. You are stuck in a box up here"—he rested his finger on the spot in the plan—"with a lovely job in duchesses. Fée tips you, 'Orchestra 9, Row A,' or 'Balcony 7, front row,' or something. Will that mean anything to you?"

"It will mean everything!" Roscoe assured him. "All that Fée has to do is to count the number of seats from the end where a suspect is sitting; then to count back—A, B, C—from the front; then to act nervously with her hands, covering and uncovering the diamonds to give me dots and dashes."

"But——" Stopford interrupted.

"But!" he was interrupted in turn, "I have had the plan of the Roxane Theatre for the past three days. Give me the box-office number of any seat in the house and I will undertake to walk to it, direct!"

"Intellect!" Stopford murmured. "A 1 memory an' all-round capacity for routine. You'll be an admiral without doubt, old scout. But let *me* get down to a few facts. It's agreed that Fée goes to the Roxane to-night, disguised in a white wig an' spectacles. Good enough. She's well covered. The Zones aren't particularly interested in me. So I'm safe enough. But *you* are goin' to sit in an open box to be shot at?"

"Not exactly," said Roscoe. "You will find, to-night, that it'll be a hard job to shoot me without shooting the Duchesse! She's my hostess, Stoppy—and my shield."

He opened a table drawer and took out a black half mask.

"Very popular with the Zones!" said he. "And last but not least—*this!*"

He threw on the table a glittering ornament; a large diamond D on an onyx shield.

"The badge of a Divisional Zone chief!" he said. "The body of the man who gave it to me hasn't been recovered yet. And no one knows I have it!"

A bell rang.

"Ned Regan!" Roscoe exclaimed. "Let him in, Stoppy."

§ III

The red light in a vault below Manhattan had been glowing steadily for some time, and now:

"Report," directed a smooth voice, "of Sector captain covering apartment at present occupied by ex-Zone Officer 2 A—Fée Czerna."

"Report to hand," came a prompt reply. "Sector Captain 1 A 1, covering apartment, reports that Dr. Stopford and Commander Drake Roscoe visited at 5:30 P.M. Ned W. Regan joined them at 5:40. Sector captain's observations through glasses several times interrupted because Roscoe, at window of apartment, seemed to have detected glitter of lenses. Timed 5:45. Report ends."

"Report of H.Q. patrol covering from lobby."

"To hand. Patrol confirms arrival of Roscoe and Stopford at 5:30 and Regan at 5:40. All remain in apartment. Report ends."

Immediately an order was issued.

"Reinforce Group masters with A taxis and H.Q. cars. At least seven must cover. Withdraw two if neces-

sary from theatre area. Instruct Zone Officer 1 B to take over lobby. Advise H.Q. patrol. Roscoe, Regan, and Stopford must be covered to their destinations which must be instantly reported. Fée Czerna will be disguised. She must be identified and reported the moment she leaves the building. Move. Connect chief chemist."

The red light went out. A blue one appeared.

"Laboratory," a Teutonic voice announced.

"Give me the latest reports on cables."

"Everything in order, except Service 5. This will have to be fused from manhole on Forty-ninth Street. Plant ready and party under Group master standing by. I suggest protection in case operations are suspected."

"Disconnect."

The blue light went out. A yellow-gloved hand touched a button. The red light appeared, and:

"H.Q.," a voice reported. "Last order transmitted."

"Concentrate four firing groups," the man in the vault ordered, "in charge of a Sector captain, upon Forty-ninth Street between Sixth and Broadway, at half after nine. Group master operating under the chief chemist may require cover for his work. Advise Sector captain in charge that *nothing* must be allowed to interfere with this. Instruct Zone Officer 1 A that all Sectors must be open for withdrawal of firing groups, but that central sectors must not be weakened for this purpose. Move. Connect Divisional chiefs in rotation."

Could a representative of Police Headquarters have been present in this prehistoric cavern, he must surely have realized that the Zones were on the eve of a major operation.

§ IV

That night the Roxane Theatre was in a state of siege unsuspected by the crowds who thronged Broadway hoping for a glimpse of the king or at least of some one of the many notabilities attending the gala performance.

No less than forty windows commanding aspects of the theatre had been commandeered by Deputy Commissioner Burke, and an armed man placed at each. The streets leading to and adjoining the theatre area were sown thickly with detectives, and inside the theatre, one seat in every twenty was occupied by a police officer.

Deputy Commissioner Burke had made a workmanlike job of protecting the royal visitors on the first occasion which seemed to call for such protection. Drake Roscoe, in the manager's office, overlooking a sketch plan of dispositions, admitted as much.

"It looks to me, Burke," said he, glancing up at the grim, blue-jowled face of the chief of police, "that you can go home and go to sleep."

Burke shifted five inches of cigar and half an inch of ash from the left corner of his mouth to the right.

"I'm standing by," said he. "There's five million dollars, real stuff, in this theatre to-night. If there hadn't been any Zones, it would have tempted somebody. I'm not looking for murder—unless it's yours. I'm looking for robbery. There's been the devil with some of the artists. I won't allow the house lights to be lowered. I've got three men on the switchboards."

"If there was a hold-up in the theatre," Roscoe mused

aloud, "they'd never make a getaway through the men posted outside."

"I reckon they wouldn't," Burke conceded cautiously. "They'd have to make it under the biggest batch of lights in the world."

When the theatre filled just before the curtain went up, the blaze of jewels from the box occupied by the royal party barely competed with Park Avenue. No opera first night could have eclipsed it.

World-famous diamonds were there. In the third row of the orchestra stalls was a recently acquired ruby (purchase price one hundred thousand dollars, *vide* newspapers) worn by its ex-actress who wore very little else. The ruby and the lady were accompanied by their purchaser. The historic Greuze pearls were there on the white neck of the beautiful duchesse, so that when Roscoe accompanied her to her box he found himself suddenly the target of a battery of opera glasses.

He had not anticipated being alone with her, but apparently the other members of the party had been unavoidably detained. It did not entirely suit his purpose, however. As he stared down at a distinguished-looking, white-haired lady who surveyed the house through large, tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles, he hoped that his dazzling companion would not detect the signals.

The Duchesse de Greuze wore black, as if further to accentuate the extraordinary whiteness of her arms and shoulders; and her raven's wing hair was coiled low on her neck in antique Spanish mode.

"Orchestra B, Number 7," signalled Madame Czerna. "Zone officer."

Roscoe memorized a thick-set blond man of German appearance.

"Orchestra D. Numbers 11 and 12, Sector captain and Group master."

So the signals flashed, until fifteen members of the Zones had been identified. Meanwhile the duchesse exchanged nods and hand-waves with numerous acquaintances, some of them known also to Roscoe. They discussed the distinguished audience, and the audience discussed the duchesse and her friend.

The box occupied by the royal party had been curtained, so that frustrated curiosity vented itself in another direction.

"She begins to look old, dear!"

"Evidently the men don't think so, Mamma!"

"Lovely creature. Who's the mahogany-faced bloke with her?"

"Do you think the pearls are real?"

"Drake Roscoe!"

"The duc is very feeble, you know. . . ."

"Her first husband drank. . . ."

"So they say."

"Always *young* men, yes. . . ."

"Centre front row, balcony. *Divisional chief,*" Fée signalled suddenly.

Then the performance to become historic in theatrical annals commenced. Ned W. Regan, known and respected by every crook in Christendom, prowled around the house, checking the dispositions of defending forces. Burke was back-stage somewhere. Nobody knew what to expect. Everybody was keyed up to an almost intolerable pitch.

Burke came out of the stage door and made his way around to the front of the house. Ned Regan was standing in the foyer.

"All clear everywhere," said Burke. "But the place bristles with gunmen. It's the Zones, Ned. But what in hell's their game?"

That was at fifty minutes after nine. At ten o'clock the Zones moved.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Black White Way

§ I

BELOW the city a red light glowed.

"Division A," a crisp voice reported. "Station covered. Zone officer standing by. All units at action quarters. Report ends."

"Carry on," the masked man replied smoothly, "according to plan. Disconnect."

"Division B," said a high, harsh voice. "Stations covered. Zone officers standing by. All units at action quarters. Report ends."

"Carry on according to plan. Disconnect."

"Division C." This sounded like a Dutchman. "Four firing groups from Zone 3 C concentrated to cover operations on Forty-ninth Street. Chief chemist's party arrived. Chief chemist in charge. No opposition thus far. All units at action quarters. Report ends."

"Carry on according to plan. Disconnect."

"Division D," announced a deep, cultured voice. "Speaking from office of Sector captain in charge Roxane Theatre. Zone units and state units as reported. Have readjusted position of six operatives. Drake Roscoe has three times left the box of the Duchesse de Greuze and been covered to telephone. Messages in cypher. Ex-Zone Officer Fée Czerna identified. She is in

touch by Morse with Roscoe. Two operatives detailed to cover. All units standing by. Report ends."

"Carry on according to plan. Ex-Zone Officer Fée Czerna is not to be removed from the rolls but must be brought to Headquarters without fail not later than ten-thirty. Disconnect."

§ II

At ten o'clock the greatest tenor, since Caruso, who had ever sung in the Metropolitan Opera House was acknowledging rapturous applause for the deathlessly popular *Pagliacci* aria when every light in the Roxane Theatre went out.

Burke had just got back to the switchboard below the stage when it happened, and:

"Hell's flames!" he roared, and dropped his cigar. "What's the big idea!"

"Not my funeral," said a voice in the dark. "Power's gone."

Burke lugged a torch from the tail of his dress coat and plunged for the stairs.

In the theatre, pandemonium had broken loose. Women screamed. Nobody knew why. Men shouted. Nobody knew what they said. Then:

"Silence!" roared a mighty voice; and again: "Silence!"

It was a voice toughened and trained by stress of issuing intelligible orders above gales of the seven seas.

That magnificent harsh voice achieved a momentary triumph. There was a lull, and:

"Keep your seats," Drake Roscoe continued. "There's no cause for alarm."

In flat denial of his assurance, a shrill scream burst from the royal box, then:

"Quick!" The duchesse grasped his hand, and he felt the contact of cool gems. "My pearls! Hide them. I am afraid."

"Right!" said he. "I will do my best. Stay here whatever happens."

"You are going to leave me?"

"I must."

Her long, slim fingers closed on his sleeve, groped upward . . . her arms clung to him.

"Stay! I beg of you. I order you to stay!"

"Forgive me! I have got my duty to do!"

He tore free—and was gone.

Matches, which immediately became extinguished, and some few pocket torches broke the gloom of the big building. Screams of the women became terrible. Then the first shot was fired—somewhere in the balcony.

Struggling masses fought for the exits. A torch gleamed suddenly upon the face of a man who wore a black mask. The torch was dashed from the hand of its owner.

From the back of the theatre, Stopford, packed in among a mass of humanity, had seen Fée Czerna spring up at the moment that the lights failed. He had heard her voice, appealing, pitiful. He was halfway to the seat she had occupied now, dazed, bruised, fighting desperately, striving to shelter the women he met, not knowing friend from foe.

A ray from a torch shone blindingly into his eyes. He

received a sickening blow on the temple—and crumpled up between the seats. . . .

Out on Broadway a Stygian darkness reigned.

No man had ever seen such a sight, nor dreamed he would live to see it. Except for car lights, the White Way was black from sidewalk to tip of its tallest buildings.

Drake Roscoe's sea sense, alone, guided him to the one spot in New York that night where he could be useful.

Allowing for drift, the press of panic-stricken humanity—estimating the opposition of detectives planted in that section of the theatre—he had calculated that Fée Czerna would be taken out by the second exit on the prompt side.

For, in the instant before the light failed, he had seen, as Stopford had seen, that she was marked down. The man who had sat in the centre of the circle was the organizing genius in immediate charge of this classical hold-up; and Roscoe paid him the compliment of concluding that his calculations would coincide with his own.

They did.

Wearing his mask, he fought in darkness through a knot of bewildered people to where a big closed car was drawn up. Two men were lifting in an insensible woman.

The night was hideous with clamours. Ever resourceful, the Fire Department had turned out with searchlights. The weird howling of their approach through the pitch darkness of Broadway came remotely over a human babel.

As Fée Czerna was placed in the car:

"Beat it!" said Roscoe.

The man whose shoulder he had grasped turned swiftly. Roscoe drew back the lapel of his coat. The second man turned, automatic raised, then:

"Divisional chief!" said the first. "All clear. What orders, Chief?"

"Report to Sector captain in front of theatre."

The pair hurried off.

"You're through for to-night," said Roscoe to the chauffeur. "Beat it."

"Good enough, Chief!"

The man left the wheel and disappeared among the frightened throng lost in Broadway darkness.

Roscoe closed the door of the car, jumped to the driving seat, and moved off just as the first searchlight split a blinding white gully through the blackness.

As he drove on, debating where safety lay, he reflected that at least he had saved their gallant little French ally from an unimaginable fate. That the others had survived he could only hope. He had a small fortune in pearls in his pocket, and a profound mystery to solve: the Duchesse de Greuze.

There would be arrests, no doubt, and some of the property which had changed hands in the most sensational raid in criminal history might be recovered. But if the loss fell far below four million dollars he would be surprised.

He drove into a lighted area on Park Avenue, and:

"Damn them!" he said, pulling up and looking around at his beautiful, insensible passenger—"the Zones have scored a big victory. How big, I don't know yet."

CHAPTER XXV

Rescue

§ I

"It's all terribly interesting," said the Big Politician, and his lined face was lighted up by the smile famous in two hemispheres. "It's more than a little alarming. But I'm still mystified. Seems to me, now, Champion"—turning to his host—"that this pleasure cruise is a frame-up."

The party assembled in the saloon of Peter Champion's famous yacht, *White Hawk,* awaited the host's reply.

Peter Champion looked around the table. No ladies were present. There had been a wholly unforeseen gale during the hours of early morning and some of the passengers were still suffering consequences. Following a short interval:

"Judge for yourself," said he. "Before the month's out you're liable to be President of the United States. Page Sutton, here, and I, aim to make sure you are. There's Deputy Commissioner Burke facing you and Ned Regan on your left. Without wishing to be rude to the charming company on board, I may add that Commander Drake Roscoe isn't here for his health."

A certain sense of tension made itself felt. Dr. Stop-

ford carefully adjusted his monocle and gravely studied the pale, intellectual face of Peter Champion, Junior, seated at the lower end of the long table. In spite of its youth, this was the face of one who had suffered.

"My son," Champion added, "can tell you something about the Zones."

"Ah!" said John Wilberforce Wright, "I thought so! This short cruise *was* a frame-up?"

"So far as you're concerned," Burke broke in: "Sure! There was a plot back there, sir, to kidnap you on the eve of the election!"

"To kidnap *me!*"

"Just that."

The famous politician looked around amazedly.

"With what object?" he asked. "Maybe I'm so dense than an X-ray wouldn't penetrate to my brain. But what anybody has to gain by kidnapping me I confess I can't imagine . . . unless . . ."

He turned. His glance met that of Ned Regan.

But Regan's dark face was unreadable. Then:

"If you're thinking," said Burke, gazing fixedly at the end of his cigar which he now held before his eyes like a conductor's baton, "of ex-Governor Bronson, I haven't a scrap of evidence at Headquarters to justify such a monstrous suspicion."

"But there's nobody else my disappearance would benefit," Wright persisted. "It's common knowledge that I'm known as 'Number One' and he as 'Number Two'! Unless there's a great block of dark votes somewhere, one of us will surely be President. We are in no sense friends, and never have been. But——"

"The idea is preposterous," Drake Roscoe burst in.

"A man with Bronson's political record couldn't possibly be in league with the Zones."

"They've just raised four million dollars," Ned Regan growled, "in the biggest hold-up this country ever knew. What are they going to do with it?"

"A member of the firm was concerned in the raid on Zone Headquarters, if I remember rightly," Stopford murmured.

"Bronson Brothers' office," said Burke, replacing his cigar, "adjoined. Bronsons' were cleared at the inquiry."

"Funny, all the same," Regan growled. "With all the arrests made, we've never got any nearer to finding out who Head Centre is. And as to Great Head Centre . . ."

"In short," said Wilberforce Wright, "you have conspired to snatch me out of New York at the height of my campaign, because——"

"Because," Roscoe finished the sentence, "if we hadn't done so, it's a dead certainty Bronson would be President!"

"Why?"

"If you disappeared, who's to stop him?"

"But I can't remain at sea indefinitely!"

"It isn't necessary," Roscoe assured him. "The plot was fixed to operate yesterday. It won't be any use to-day. We were almost sure we had it covered, but to make doubly sure we shifted you out of the Zones for thirty-six hours!"

"I see!" The politician smiled wryly. "But are you sure the Zones don't extend to, say, the twelve-mile limit?"

"According to the only Zone map I ever saw," Page Sutton answered, "they extend beyond that!"

§ II

At a point roughly corresponding in position with Times Square but nearly a quarter mile below it, a woman sat behind a long, narrow table. Several extraordinary pieces of apparatus and unfamiliar instruments lay upon the table, as well as a number of books, papers, and opened charts. The woman wore a black velvet robe of mediæval fashion, having a cowl, which at present hung loose. Her blue-black hair was coiled low on her neck and from her ears depended large hoops of diamonds.

Slim hands rested on the table. Sometimes a movement would result in a loose sleeve of the robe falling back, when it revealed an ivory-white arm. She wore a black silk mask, through the eye slits of which her luminous eyes stared straight before her.

A curious globular lamp on the table provided the only light, which was cast downward in such a manner that the rest of the room lay in utter darkness. There was a sound of falling water, far off, like that of a distant cataract.

In the darkness before the table an illuminated map shone, as if suspended in space. It was a map of New York City covered with a network of variously coloured sections. It was the notorious Zone map for which Police Headquarters had searched in vain; for which sums amounting to nearly a million dollars had been offered during the past two years.

The famous Zones—circles surrounding a central point which probably corresponded to the original Headquarters—covered, in addition to the whole of Manhattan, some parts of the Bronx, Long Island, Brooklyn, Jersey City, and a considerable area of ocean.

Now, white taper fingers touched a keyboard. Sector by Sector the Zone map faded, until a piece of Staten Island and the tip of Sandy Hook were the only points of land showing in a considerable expanse of sea.

A red light sprang to view above the map, and:

"H.Q.," a nasal voice announced. "Report of Group Master 1, Sector 1 A 1, aboard the *White Hawk*. Course changed to westerly. Unless changed again will be crossing steam lane at 6:30 P.M., 40.24 North, 73.59 West. All clear. Timed 6 P.M. Report ends."

Some moments of silence followed. The woman at the long table studied those Sectors of the map still visible, with inscrutable dark eyes. Then:

"Report of Divisional Chief A," she said.

"No report to hand."

"Report of H.Q. patrol covering."

"Nothing to add to last report."

"Report of air patrol detailed."

"To hand. Group master in charge reports no sign of motorboat in which Divisional chief set out. In view of weather last night, loss feared. Timed 5:45. Report ends."

There followed a period of silence lasting nearly three minutes. Only that distant sound of falling water intruded upon it. Then a slender hand moved, once:

the map sections faded; twice: the vault became black. Only the speck of red light glowed, evilly. At last:

"Advise Zone officer detailed for special observation," the woman's calm voice ordered, "to report immediately positions of inward and outward steamers, with particulars. Sector captain in charge airplane A is to stand by for instant move. Transmit this order and connect the chief chemist."

§ III

For a pleasure cruise the weather had not hitherto been propitious. *White Hawk* was seaworthy enough for a voyage to Europe, and the recent blow had not disturbed her officers. But when the elements rule soup out of the menu and fiddles decorate the table at every meal, only the hardened seafarer can be expected to register enjoyment.

Peter Champion wandered the deck of his yacht. He was a man obsessed by two notions. One: the utter destruction of the organization known as "The Zones"; two: the elevation to the Presidency of John Wilberforce Wright.

He now believed that these aims were identical—that the Zones planned to defeat Wright's election.

His walk was elastic, for all his bulk: the old lumberman carried himself like an athlete. Abruptly his promenade ceased. A deckhand was attaching something to a lifebuoy lashed to the port rail.

Peter Champion watched awhile; then:

"By whose orders," he demanded, "was that flask of hooch fixed to that belt?"

The man turned as though stung. He was a side-whiskered dago of unpleasant aspect. Recognizing the speaker, his expression became compounded of fear, servility, and murder.

"I was afraid, sir," he said at last. "I am poor swimmer; and if we go down——"

"What's our chance of going down?"

The man was cowed by the ferocity of Champion. He made no reply.

"No weather could sink *White Hawk,*" the remorseless voice went on. "If you're afraid, you have private reasons. What are they?"

"No reason, sir!"

"You're a liar!" *Quartermaster!"*

Peter Champion's voice, raised, was like the trumpeting of a wounded elephant. Commotion followed. The deckhand glared, homicidally, at Champion; noted his bulk, his clenched, gnarled fists . . . and waited.

A group had gathered before the quartermaster came.

"This man's under arrest," said Peter Champion. "Notify Captain Ransome and put things in order."

"You will hear more of this—when we reach shore," said the prisoner.

His teeth chattered as though ague had attacked him.

"Good enough," Chapman returned grimly. "So long as I hear nothing more of you while we're at sea."

Three of the women were on deck now—an attractive trio: Molly O'Hay, Page Sutton's pretty daughter, and Fée Czerna.

Champion drew Roscoe aside.

"We're covered!" said he. "That man was planning his getaway!"

"Ssh!" Roscoe cautioned, and looked along the deck to where an animated group discussed the recent arrest. "I never hoped we'd escaped the Zones. Leave the position to me. He's probably a mere Group master. We should be grateful, Champion, for small mercies. We *do* know the official rating of the Zone officials!"

"Hell! What's this!" Champion exclaimed.

White Hawk's engines had been slowed down.

"Stand by Number One lifeboat!" came a remote cry from the bridge.

"What's this!" Champion repeated, and started for the ladder.

He was interrupted by his chief officer.

"No cause for alarm, Mr. Champion. Look-out has sighted an insensible man wearing a life belt, right on our course. I'm going off to pick him up."

"Good," said Peter Champion.

The chief officer saluted and passed on.

White Hawk was run on battleship routine. She was Champion's hobby—a hobby in which only a multi-millionaire could have indulged. The yacht, a graceful thing with the lines of a greyhound, was constantly in commission for a cruise, Chesapeake Bay or the Norwegian fjords; it was all one to Peter Champion. But Captain Ransome was expected to be ready to sail for either at short notice.

Everybody craned over the rails, watching the rescue. The Atlantic was like a sea of oil, such are her feminine moods. *White Hawk's* davits worked in a manner which

proved boat drill to be efficient. Chocks were free. The chief officer had gone away without a hitch. He came aboard as smoothly.

The rescued man was insensible. He had been badly mauled by the sea. Exhaustion had reduced him to a desperate state.

"Oh!"—the exclamation came from Page Sutton's daughter—"it's Mr. Partington!"

Then others recognized the victim of the sea. He was Hilary Partington, editor of the New York *Critic*.

"Take him to my cabin," said Dr. Stopford. "Don't waste time."

CHAPTER XXVI

Thirty Miles From Shore

§ I

"Lou" Bronson, next to John Wilberforce Wright the hottest candidate for the Presidential chair, sat with his head resting on upraised palms behind the handsome table in his library. The room was spacious, gloomy, booky; shadowed except where specks of light gleamed upon black oak or faded gilt of some rare binding.

The Bronson home was in a backwater, where a few representatives of original New York stock still lingered in their stateliness. The room was quiet. No echo of the busy life coursing through the neighbouring artery—a populous avenue—penetrated to its Old World reserve.

Ex-Governor Bronson had just returned from a mass meeting, where his magnetic personality and power of oratory had resulted in a scene of enthusiasm almost unique even in the hectic political history of the state.

Every man and every woman who had fallen under the spell of his silver rhetoric had determined that Lewis Bronson was preordained President. Representatives of several influential groups whose spokesmen were pledged to his nomination had been present, and were more than ever assured of triumph.

Lewis Bronson was red, as were nearly all the family, with scanty, straight hair and colourless lashes. But his strange dark eyes held that magnetism which dominates. Given different complexion and hair, one would have said that ex-Governor Bronson had Napoleonic characteristics.

For a long time he sat staring abstractedly before him. Then a muted 'phone bell rang. He took the receiver off one of the several instruments on the table, and:

"Yes?" he said, adding strangely: "Z."

"Zones," came the reply. "G.H.Q."

"Head Centre, New York."

"Stand by Great Head Centre wishes to speak."

No change of expression showed upon the pale face. But a new glint seemed to come into Bronson's eyes. Then:

"Great Head Centre," said a woman's calm voice. "Report to me personally at once. Disconnect."

Bronson replaced the receiver, glanced at a clock on his table, and stood up. He had given orders that he was not to be disturbed. The library door was locked.

He crossed to a tall, antique bookcase, took out a volume from the bottom shelf, and then inserted a key in some hidden lock. He replaced the book, grasped one of the shelves, and the entire section of the case before which he stood slipped noiselessly upward, revealing a narrow passage constructed in the massive masonry of the old mansion.

Bronson stepped inside, turned and lowered the concealed door, relocked it below, and walked confidently through the utter darkness for some ten paces. Another

door was opened, a light switched on—and he was in a small room resembling a dressing room.

He removed his coat and sat down before the dressing table. . . . When he stood up again, "Lou" Bronson, prominent politician, had vanished. This was a stranger to all who knew the ex-governor. He resembled him, facially, but not in respect of complexion or hair. The Napoleonic likeness was greater than ever now; the eyes seemed more luminous beneath dark brows. . . .

At about this time a strange scene was taking place in Dr. Stopford's cabin aboard *White Hawk*.

Following half an hour's anxious work, the rescued man opened his eyes, moved weakly, and looked up at the surgeon.

"Cheery ho!" said the latter. "Don't try to talk yet. Sip this spot of nourishment and be at peace."

But, a few minutes later:

"Where am I?" Partington whispered.

"You're on board Mr. Champion's yacht *White Hawk*."

"Good God!"

Colour had been returning slowly to the man's cheeks. Now it fled—leaving him as pale as when they had hauled him out of the sea. He stared about with a sort of growing horror, and:

"What time?" he asked—"What time is it?"

"To be strictly accurate, it's some two bells in the second dog-watch."

Partington started up, and:

"The time!" he repeated hoarsely. "What time is it?"

"Sorry," Stopford murmured, and removed his

monocle. "Lie down again, d'you mind? It's just after seven, shore time."

Partington raised his hand to his throat in a queer, frenzied gesture.

"My things," said he—"Where are they?"

Stopford, busily polishing his monocle, watched the speaker.

"Your kit's bein' dried, Mr. Partington."

"You know me, then?"

"Somebody on board told me. I haven't hitherto had the pleasure."

The man was sitting up again, glaring wildly.

"Do me a favour," he entreated. "Get my cigar case! It sounds absurd!" . . . His voice failed him. He was weak as a kitten. But some secret dread drove him remorselessly. "There are—sentimental things in it. I should hate to think . . ."

"Good enough," said Stopford cheerily, "but *do* lie down."

Out in the alleyway:

"How's the patient?" said Roscoe.

His bronzed face was set in a very grim way.

"Kind of funny, old scout," Stopford replied. "He's peeved about his bits of kit. Most odd. But what's up with you?"

Roscoe stared hard at the speaker with an expression suggesting that something in Stopford's words had started a new line of thought; then:

"Come along to my cabin," said he.

In the cabin:

"Look!" Roscoe invited. "I found this in the arrested deckhand's box!"

He placed a small badge on the bed cover. It was blue and white enamel with a tiny diamond G underneath.

"Group master!" Stopford murmured. "But why should this excite you, dear thing? We knew it from the start."

"Look at this!"

Roscoe held up a queer-looking contrivance, and:

"Good God!" said Stopford—"a *gas-mask!*"

"Also in his kit!" Roscoe added harshly. "And now . . . where are the things belonging to Mr. Hilary Partington?"

"Good Lord!" Stopford exclaimed, and his expression changed suddenly. "Dryin' in the cook's galley, I fancy. But——"

They were in the cook's quarters in forty seconds.

When they returned to Roscoe's room, Roscoe threw a glittering badge on his bed, beside the smaller one.

It represented a large diamond D.

§ II

Down below, in a locked cabin, a frantic man was banging on the door.

"Someone! Please tell the captain! I *must* see the captain. I *must*——"

"Hi!" interrupted a gruff voice, speaking from the alleyway. "If you see the captain it'll be bad for your health!"

"There is something I must say to him. I tell you this ship doomed—doomed!"

"*You'll* be doomed if you don't shut up."

"Take a message for me! If you are Christian, if you value your life, do as I pray of you. . . ."

Hurrying footsteps sounded. There was a muttered exchange of words. A key was put in the lock, and the door opened.

Drake Roscoe came in, followed by Dr. Stopford. The prisoner sprang forward, but:

"Stand still!" said Roscoe.

The man stood still. Such is the magic of one used to command. The door was closed.

"What's your name?" Roscoe demanded.

"Manoel Vara."

"Portuguese?"

"Yes, by birth. But American citizen."

"Group master of the Zones?"

Vara's eyes narrowed, opened widely, and narrowed again.

"Answer, damn you!"

"Yes."

"Are you a sailor by profession?"

"Yes."

"What are your Zone duties on this yacht?"

"To report the course."

"Have you done this?"

"Yes."

"What is going to happen?"

"I don't know."

"Don't lie!"

"I say—I swear—I don't know! I was to leave, so something will happen."

"How are you going to leave?"

"Jump overboard with a life belt."

"Are you hiding anything?"

"On my life—on my soul—I know no more. I only know this yacht doomed!"

"Is any other member of the Zones aboard?"

"No."

"Are there explosives hidden?"

"I don't know. All I know I tell you."

"Why was a gas mask served out to you?"

Vara's twitching face blanched.

"Still, I don't know! I don't know!" he cried desperately. "If I am prevented leave the ship I am told to wear it. I know nothing else."

Roscoe watched the frenzied speaker for a moment, then:

"You have been served out with an X Radio outfit for this job," he asserted. "Where is it hidden?"

Vara dropped his head in his hands.

"I knew it must bring me misfortune!" he sobbed. "It is in the prayer book in my box!"

Roscoe started for the alleyway.

"No wonder I missed it!" he snapped. "Lock the door, Stoppy."

Outside the cabin, a distant sound of excited voices reached them.

"What's this?" Stopford murmured.

"Take Partington's kit to him," Roscoe said tensely. "Don't waste a second. I'll join you in your room."

Stopford halted, staring. The sea-browned face of Drake Roscoe was oddly drawn. Under the tan he seemed to have paled.

"Old man," he said, "we've played into their hands! The chief enemies of Head Centre are aboard this yacht. We're thirty miles from shore, and the nearest ship to count, *La Patrie,* the crack Frenchman, is half an hour's steaming away!"

CHAPTER XXVII

40.26 North, 73.58 West

§ I

AT ABOUT the time that Hilary Partington was brought aboard Peter Champion's yacht, a red light glowed steadily in the vaults below Manhattan. The woman seated behind the long table did not stir. Then, uncannily:

"Chief chemist," came in Teutonic accent. "Speaking from airplane base."

"Explain your plan again. Head Centre, New York, understands the method but it is new to me."

"Certainly," came a cheery reply. "The new T.N. Vapour is discharged through a series of tubes fitted below the plane. Being very much heavier than air it falls, as a thick liquid might fall. In still weather—and it is still, now, and will be so until dusk—a plane operating from a fair altitude could register on an unprotected target of the size of *White Hawk* with certainty. The discharge is noiseless, and T.N. Vapour is invisible."

Silence ensued, until:

"It is certainly and immediately effective?" the calm feminine voice asked.

"The vapour is destructive of all life, animal and vegetable."

"There is a Zone official on board."

"He has orders to leave the yacht before we act. In the event of accident, he has been served out a special mask."

"There is no antidote?"

"Oh, but yes! Coma comes, and then a complete rigour. The antidote may be used any time before the rigour."

"How long elapses?"

"From ten to fifteen minutes."

"Have you a supply of this antidote with you?"

"But certainly!" replied the joyous tones—those of one wedded to his ghastly science and immune from all human emotions. "The unforeseen may occur, you know!"

"Is it necessary for you to supervise operations on *White Hawk* from plane in person?"

"Not absolutely. My assistant could take charge."

"Instruct assistant chemist to take charge," the woman ordered. "Transfer to Flying-boat G. You will provide yourself with a suitable supply of the antidote to T.N. Vapour. Commander Drake Roscoe is to be brought back alive to base."

"It may be difficult."

"Officer in charge of Boat G will be responsible for putting you on board *White Hawk*. You are responsible for the rest. Disconnect."

A slim finger rested on the switchboard.

"H.Q.," said a nasal voice. "Last order transmitted."

Immediately:

"Instruct base that Airplane A will leave at 6:45, assistant chemist on board. Flying-boat G will leave

immediately, with chief chemist, and will cross the course of *White Hawk*. When operations of plane are completed, chief chemist will be put aboard *White Hawk*. Group master in charge flying-boat will take further orders from chief chemist. Divisional Chief A and Group Master 1, Sector 1 A 1, are to be called on X Radio at three-minute intervals until touch established. Reports to be instantly transmitted to me. Move."

The red speck disappeared. The map sections covering 40.24 North, 73.59 West became lighted up.

§ II

Everybody who could get on deck was craning over *White Hawk's* rails. Women's voices spoke excitedly. On the navigation bridge:

"Some queer craft, sir," said the second officer. "A flying-boat. Must be a Naval experiment."

Captain Ransome focussed his glasses, and:

"Right on our course!" he muttered. "Ask Commander Roscoe to step up on the bridge."

A minute later came a rap on the door of Stopford's cabin. As the messenger walked in:

"Your cigar case isn't functioning," Roscoe was saying, addressing the man rescued from the sea. "But I suggest, Mr. Partington, that this prayer book, the property of a Group master now under arrest, may prove a possible substitute . . ."

"Excuse me, sir," the newcomer interrupted. "Captain Ransome's compliments, and would you be good enough to step up on the bridge. There's a funny craft

ahead of us—and an airplane has just been sighted which seems to be heading our way!"

A queer, faint purring note sounded.

"That prayer book," said Stopford, "has been makin' odd noises at regular intervals since we found it!"

"Give it to me—quickly!" Partington, ghastly, his forehead gleaming with perspiration, stretched out trembling hands. "I throw myself on your mercy, but I think it's too late!"

At which moment in Zone Headquarters, deep below the city, the woman seated at the long table had drawn the cowl over her head, so that, owing to the dim light of the vault, her features were indistinguishable.

From an uncurtained doorway on the right, the man who so closely resembled Napoleon Buonaparte came in. He bowed. There was a moment of silence. The woman studied the man. The man watched the woman. Somewhere, far off, a subterranean waterfall sent eerie whispers through cavernous space. Then:

"Your speech," the woman's calm voice began, "was good. Two important points were not touched upon. I anticipate your excuse. I accept it. One of your questioners seemed to have intimate knowledge of the Zones. He asked if you had any plans to end this reign of terror which he described as the Black Hand of America! Your reply was noncommittal. But you missed a great opportunity."

A point of red light glowed on the pillar supporting the vault.

"H.Q.," a voice announced. "Report of Divisional Chief A just to hand. Caught in storm. Motor failed. Carried off course. Capsized. Took to sea in life belt

and swept out by current. Became unconscious. Awakened aboard. S.Y. *White Hawk*. Reporting by X Radio from Dr. Stopford's cabin on yacht. Difficult. Suspects watched. Timed 7:15. Report ends."

"Report of Group Master 1, Sector 1 A 1, aboard *White Hawk,*" the woman's calm voice demanded.

"No report to hand."

A moment of silence, then:

"Connect Sector captain in charge of planes—immediately."

From the shadow of the cowl those unflinching dark eyes watched the man who stood before the table.

"Fate has stepped in," the woman said calmly. "We cannot afford to lose Divisional Chief A. He will be your successor in New York. No one else knows the City Zones as he does. There is time only for one thing: Recall."

"You may be too late."

The nasal voice, which sounded as though its owner were in the vault, broke in:

"Sector Captain 2 B 3 on the line."

"Connect him."

A moment later:

"Sector 2 B 3," a harsh voice announced.

"Your report."

"Plane with assistant chemist on board despatched in accordance with order, charge of Group Master 3, this Sector. Timed to operate *White Hawk* at 7:20—40.26 North, 73.58 West. Flying boat with chief chemist on board reports *White Hawk* sighted. All clear. *La Patrie* ahead of time. Due in ten minutes. Report ends."

The dark eyes under the hood were lowered rapidly. The woman was looking at the luminous dial of a small clock before her on the table.

She began to issue an order. . . .

§ III

In a locked cabin on *White Hawk* a man was kneeling in fervent prayer. He prayed in Portuguese. In Stopford's room, Partington, his message on X Radio spoken, lay, ghastly, on the bed.

"Commander Roscoe will join you in a moment, sir," announced a voice on the bridge.

Captain Ransome didn't hear the voice. He was watching a queer-looking flying-boat receding into the sunset, apparently pursued by an airplane, which, coming up from the northeast, was now heading back.

A distant siren sounded its deep, warning note.

"La Patrie!" said the chief officer. "We're dead in her track."

Captain Ransome lowered his glasses, and:

"Well," said he, "can you beat it!"

But the inscrutable Force which Omar named The Potter and which the Arab knows as Kismet had that evening saved the future of the United States.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The Manhattan Caverns

§ I

DRAKE ROSCOE wondered why the dream continued. He had passed the stage at which it held complete sway and had come to that phase when one knows one is dreaming but yet doesn't awaken.

And still the journey continued—down, and down, and down. Thus far the route had been coldly silent—except for that vague, horrible, tongueless babbling which once in a while intruded. But now, from afar off came echoing a sound of falling water. The descending passage became suddenly very steep, ending in a natural shaft of indeterminable depth.

In this subterranean chimney a zigzag wooden staircase had been constructed.

It was inadequately lighted by electric lamps placed at long intervals. The sound of falling water was becoming louder.

"Wake up!" Roscoe gave himself the unspoken order urgently. "Wake up!"

"On to the ladders!" said a harsh voice.

The dream prevailed. It was extraordinary—uncanny. His wrists, manacled behind him, were very painful.

A grotesquely ugly negro began to descend ahead of him. And Drake Roscoe followed. For some reason he was unable to look behind him. His curiosity about the owner of the harsh voice died unaccountably. He became passive again, victim of this nightmare dream.

The negro always some three steps ahead, he passed fifteen landings and stood in a place icily cold—an entrance to a tunnel ending in utter blackness. Passively following the negro, who now cast a ray from a torch along the passage, Roscoe walked to the end of the tunnel and heard footsteps of someone who came behind him without achieving sufficient fixity of purpose to glance back.

A wooden rail barred further progress. The ray of the negro's torch was lost in the void beyond. The noise of a subterranean cascade was now awesome. Although yet a long way off, it echoed around the seemingly vast cavern upon the edge of which Roscoe stood as a whisper echoes around the dome of a cathedral.

Momentarily, as the negro turned, the ray of his torch was lowered. It shone upon still, black waters. This was some uncharted, unsuspected, subterranean lake . . . Where?

"Wake up!"

Drake Roscoe's will struggled to regain charge.

"Wake up!"

"Sit down!" the harsh voice commanded.

Roscoe observed a wooden bench beside the granite wall, and upon this he dropped wearily. But at last he had seen the speaker: a thickset man rather untidily dressed but wearing a black half mask.

A light sprang up before a small wooden cupboard inset in the granite wall. The masked man opened the cupboard and revealed an outfit similar to a police telephone. It differed in that it possessed twin receivers attached to a headpiece, familiar to listeners-in, and clearly designed to enable the caller to eliminate the sound of falling water.

The headpiece adjusted:

"Zone 2 C," said the man. "Standing by in Gallery to report."

Drake Roscoe started. He twitched savagely at his bonds. He was awake at last!

§ II

In a vault hewn out of the living rock on which New York stands, a natural cavern of dark green serpentine perfected by the workers of some primitive age, a dim light shone upon the figure of a woman seated behind a long, narrow table. Upon the index finger of her white, psychic hand, a diamond glittered.

In the darkness before her a spot of red light glowed. And now a voice announced:

"H.Q."

"Report of Sector captain covering Commander Drake Roscoe," the woman ordered.

"Report to hand. Sector Captain 1 A 3 reports that Commander Drake Roscoe left apartment at 7:05 and proceeded to house of ex-Governor Bronson. Group master covering. Timed 7:15. Report ends."

"Report of Group master covering."

"To hand. Confirms. Commander arrived at Bronson house at 7:15. Timed 7:20. Report ends."

"Report of chief chemist."

"To hand. Operating in library, chief chemist projected T.N. Vapour, prepared for purpose. Subject became immediately unconscious. Chief chemist employed restoratives and proceeded according to plan. Prisoner, in passive state, handed over to Divisional chief standing in Entrance One. Timed 7:30. Report ends."

The red light glowed steadily throughout two minutes of silence, then:

"Report," directed the woman's cold voice, "of Divisional Chief C."

"To hand. Prisoner taken over from chief chemist and removed to car standing by. Driven to Entrance Two. The movement covered by police but not followed up. Handed over to Zone Officer 2 C. Timed 7:40. Report ends."

"Report of H.Q. patrol."

"Confirms that of Divisional chief. Spoke to detective on duty and states that he was satisfied. Timed 7:35. Report ends."

Immediately:

"Put through Zone Officer 2 C to me direct."

"He has already connected, and is on the line."

"Disconnect. I will speak to him."

A moment of silence followed, then:

"Zone 2 C," a harsh voice said.

"Your report."

"Standing by in Gallery," the voice replied. "Commander Drake Roscoe in hand as ordered. Group Master A Zone X has acted as guide and is here. Prisoner

recovering from effects of treatment by chief chemist. Await instructions. Report ends."

The interval between the end of his report and the next order was scarcely perceptible.

"Stand by until chief guide arrives," the imperious voice said. "Then report back to Divisional chief and dismiss. Disconnect."

Another brief interval there was until:

"H.Q.," the nasal tones announced.

"Instruct chief guide to proceed at once to Gallery and to bring Commander Drake Roscoe to H.Q. Group Master A, Zone X, will assist. Move. Connect chief chemist."

The red light died. A blue one came to life, and:

"Laboratory," a Teutonic voice announced.

§ III

Roscoe remembered. And, as nearly as that indomitable spirit was capable of the effort, resigned himself to defeat.

The episodes leading up to this evil thing which he had dreamed to be a dream stood out starkly before him. He recalled how, conscious, at long last, of the monstrous purpose of the Zones, he had made sure of the safety of Wilberforce Wright—potential President of the United States—and had hurried to the home of ex-Governor Bronson, Wright's only serious rival.

Great Head Centre—the shadowy, unimaginable being operating the Zones—planned to obtain control of the political machinery of the country! Now, on the eve of the election, no prominent politician was safe!

He had been received in the gloomy, old-style mansion where Lou Bronson, last of a once famous family and promising to add final lustre to the name, lived in mysterious seclusion.

"Silver tongue," his faction called him. "Red Lou" was the sobriquet coined by his enemies. He had gone far, and millions looked to see him go farther. He had Mussolini qualities which delighted his supporters—and frightened his opponents. He was the stormy petrel of American politics. But his backing for the Presidency was formidable.

Roscoe was ushered into a vast, book-lined library, shadowed, and impressive by reason of its family associations.

Lewis Bronson he had never met. He only knew him by name and in appearance through the medium of the illustrated newspapers. The real man surprised him.

He was seated behind a big table—a smallish figure, having scanty red hair, pallid complexion, and colourless eyelashes. But his magnetic dark eyes were the eyes of a conqueror. And when he rose to greet his visitor Roscoe's heart seemed to miss a beat.

Given dark hair and a different complexion, Lou Bronson would have been the double of Napoleon Buonaparte. So much granted, Lou Bronson . . . But at this point, Roscoe's brain had reeled.

Perhaps he had betrayed himself. He would never know—now. Perhaps, in their subsequent conversation, no word of which he could recall, he had spoken unguardedly . . .

In either event, he had been right! The incredible was true! But he would never live to proclaim it!

Ex-Governor Bronson was Head Centre!

How he had been put to sleep memory refused to reveal. He could recall no attack. He had taken no drink. He was not smoking. He had just been sitting talking to Bronson and trying to behave naturally, diplomatically, in the presence of this monster whose maniacal ambitions threatened to bring destruction upon the United States, when—a blank came.

Now, in a huge, primeval cavern, beneath the world's newest great metropolis, five, ten, fifteen minutes passed. Only the deathless echo of falling water carried on relentlessly—ghastly because of its monotony! because it seemed to have been repeating itself not for hundreds, nor for thousands, but for millions of years.

The man who had spoken on the 'phone in the cabinet had returned, seating himself beside Roscoe. He had extinguished the light. The hideous negro sat on the other side of the prisoner. Both of his guards held him firmly. His wrists were handcuffed behind him. And the darkness was like that of the Pit.

Then, a tiny speck a vast way off, a light appeared.

Almost imperceptibly it came nearer, until it revealed granite walls, irregular, monstrous, rearing up into great pools of shadow—still, black water below.

Along a narrow path, a mere ledge above this prehistoric lake, a man appeared carrying a torch.

His was a wild, dishevelled figure—his gray hair a mane, his beard long and matted. And he cried out as he walked, seemingly addressing an unseen company.

The light of his torch, as he approached, shone upward and downward. Sometimes its ray was lost in

unexplorable shadows above. Sometimes it glittered on the tideless water beneath.

Perilous though the path appeared to be, this wild creature walked it confidently, coming at last to the narrow rock gallery with its protecting wooden rail.

"Greeting, little lord!" he cried.

The vagaries of the light as he had approached were now explained when the masked man shot a sudden ray into the bearded face. Those staring blue eyes were sightless. The torch was evidently intended to assist those whom he led. For the guide was blind.

"Zone 2 C," said the masked man sternly. "Take this prisoner to Headquarters. Group Master A goes with you. Move."

He heaved Roscoe to his feet, and:

"Follow," he added grimly, "because if you get lost down here you'll never be found."

He turned away. Roscoe heard his receding footsteps echoing along the tunnel leading to the ladder, to the world above. Then the sound was swamped by the song of that distant cataract.

He was alone in the bowels of the rock with a blind madman and a hideous negro whom he had recognized, in the one glimpse obtained since sanity had returned, to be a deaf mute.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Duchesse

§ I

"I'M NOT satisfied," Ned Regan declared explosively. "I can't forget what happened to you, Mr. Burke, not so long ago. You stepped around to this very office and signed an order for the release of as big a bunch of electrics as was ever roped in!"

Deputy Commissioner Burke swung back in his chair, staring up at the speaker. His long cigar covered Regan.

"Sure I did," he growled. "I was full of hop, Ned, though how they'd loaded me I can't make out. But what's the link, anyhow?"

"I rather gather," said Dr. Stopford, the third man in the commissioner's room, "that Regan, although he saw Roscoe come out of the Bronson abode and drive off with some bloke unknown, isn't satisfied that he's safe."

"Well!" cried Regan. "Where has he gone? Why doesn't he report back? Answer me that."

"Commander Roscoe," Burke replied sourly, "is in charge of State operations against the Zone group. It's no part of his job to report to you—or to me. This crazy idea of yours about Bronson is giving you a temperature."

"Likely enough," Regan growled. "But when you remember that Solke, your own right-hand man, was one

of the bunch—and Partington, and a few more—why not Bronson——"

He was interrupted by a knock.

"Come in," Burke called.

Police Captain Markham came in.

"No news of Commander Roscoe," he reported.

Burke swung around and glared.

"Has Mr. Bronson moved out?"

"No, Chief—not all evening!"

"Listen," Ned Regan broke in, "just to oblige *me,* because I'm crazy and got a bad headache: have Markham call at the Bronson home and insist on seeing Lou Bronson. Say you're anxious about his safety."

"What's gained?" Burke asked.

"I'll be satisfied," Regan told him, "if Bronson is there."

"You've got me guessing," Burke confessed.

"Like enough. But I'm open to lay a thousand dollars to one that Bronson *isn't* there!"

"He was seen to go in, Mr. Regan," Markham said, "and he hasn't come out."

"Then go and talk to him!"

Deputy Commissioner Burke, cigar at a very odd angle in his grim mouth, studied the speaker curiously. He had a healthy respect for Ned W. Regan. He knew that his compatriot could see much farther in the dark than any member of official Headquarters. He had proved it in a dozen brilliantly conducted inquiries. There must be something in this insistence on seeing Lou Bronson.

Burke turned again to Markham, and:

"Do as Mr. Regan suggests," he ordered. "Daly

can take over in your absence. Use what brains you've got and be back quick."

"Any other instructions?"

"Sure—Start!"

Police Captain Markham started.

§ II

The nightmare journey was ended, so that the vault in which Drake Roscoe found himself no longer had power to excite his amazement.

Hewn out of living rock, it was roughly oval in shape. The rock was dark green serpentine, so dark that it appeared black, having been refined to a glossy surface.

A natural column upheld the roof. It was exquisitely fashioned to resemble a date palm, and on the vaulted ceiling it expanded six geometrical branches which swept gracefully upward, dropped downward upon its walls, and were caught up and supported by six slender pillars. There were arched doorways to right and left of the pillar. Another, larger opening gave upon the eastern end of the vault.

In this opening Roscoe stood, manacled.

A vague green light pervaded the place. Far off echoed and reëchoed the sound of falling water. Roscoe repressed a shudder. He had had a view of that awe-inspiring subterranean cataract leaping from a vast cavern downward to unknown and greater deeps.

In a high-backed Spanish chair ornamented with stamped leather, behind a long table, a woman sat watching him.

She wore a black, mediæval robe and a silk half mask.

Somewhere behind Roscoe in the blackness of the rock passage the deaf mute was standing. The woman spoke.

"Commander Roscoe," she said, "I expressed a hope a year ago that some day we might meet. I added that I trusted I should win. Do you remember?"

"Clearly," Roscoe answered. "It was my first introduction to X Radio."

"My hope is realized. Don't you think, fully?"

"It looks that way."

There was a short but very eloquent silence, then:

"If I have your wrists freed," the woman went on, "will you give me your word to attempt no violence?"

"No," said Roscoe promptly.

The masked woman smiled.

"You have nothing to gain. No man, unguided, could find his way under those falls and around the lake."

"I agree with you," he answered quickly. "But there must be another way . . . *Duchesse!*"

He had counted on this stroke: the expression on his brown face betrayed the fact. He was tensed up as he watched for its effect. In that green light he seemed unnaturally pale. He was of a type which never looks dishevelled, but nevertheless he was not his usual spruce self.

The effect he looked for did not come. Momentarily, he doubted—wondered—questioned.

Then the woman stood up, walked around the end of the table and faced him. She dropped the mediæval robe and unfastened the silk mask.

Beneath her robe she wore a simple sea-green gown

which sheathed her statuesque figure like a serpent's skin. Her arms and shoulders were of ivory whiteness. Her long, unfathomable eyes looked into his.

"I knew you would recognize me," she stated calmly. "It was inevitable."

This was a night of revelations.

Great Head Centre was the *Duchesse de Greuze!*

"I suppose," said Roscoe, and laughed dryly, "I am privileged because my hours are numbered?"

The duchesse leaned back against the table, resting her slender hands upon its edge, and:

"You can make your own choice," she answered softly. "I have a goal upon which I keep my eyes steadily fixed. *You* have tempted me to glance aside. I am strong. So are you. Together, we should be unassailable."

Roscoe stared, met her unwavering look, and understood.

"Thanks," he said—but not mockingly. "Let's talk about something else. Would you care to be so kind as to give me a cigarette and light it for me?"

The Duchesse de Greuze hesitated for one long moment. Then from the table she took up a box. Selecting a cigarette, she placed it between her lips, lighted it, and then gave it to him.

Her coldly beautiful face very close to his, she looked into his eyes.

"Drake Roscoe," she said, "you are a brave man, and a clever one. But this is your Waterloo. Why not make the best of it?"

"I must try to," he returned, and smiled—the boyish, careless smile which revealed the soul of Drake Roscoe.

She turned aside; then:

"No doubt you are interested in your peculiar surroundings," she continued, now speaking as a hostess making conversation. "These caves were discovered by a man named Flynn nearly five years ago. He was digging a pit in his garden—I don't know for what purpose—and he literally fell into one of the three known entrances. That was a long way north of here, in the Bronx area. This original entrance is now closed."

She was acting—wonderfully. Roscoe took his cue from her.

"Flynn appeals to me," he declared. "Tell me more about him."

The duchesse casually lighted a cigarette.

"He is remarkable. Alone and unaided, except by guide lines and a torch, he explored miles of the caverns and charted them. He passed the great falls and penetrated to this vault. I may add that he is an old sailor. This may account for his skill and courage."

"Sailors are notoriously mad," Roscoe muttered.

"They are also dense—and obstinate!"

She faced him, and:

"In all my life," she said intensely, "I had never met a man I could *respect*—until I met you. Does this confession interest you?"

Roscoe's unflinching regard encountered the challenge of dark eyes which had never known defeat. It was a clashing of cutlass and rapier. Then:

"It does," he said. "You are a very bad but a very wonderful woman. Your respect is an honour."

The Duchesse de Greuze watched him unwaveringly as he spoke. Her expression never once betrayed her.

A speck of red light glowed on the pillar above Roscoe's head, and:

"H.Q.," said a nasal voice. "Head Centre is here."

The duchesse turned to Roscoe.

"As I have an important conference," she said, "I must give you an hour's leisure to consider your plans for the future."

She went behind the table and touched a button on a switchboard. Roscoe dropped the stump of his cigarette and set his heel on it.

Looking up, he met the fixed regard of long, dark eyes.

"In one year from to-night," said the duchesse softly, "I shall control the greatest empire in history . . . the American Empire! You may share it if you wish. Think over your decision."

§ III

"Bronson wouldn't see me, Chief," Police Captain Markham reported.

Ned Regan brought his fist down on the table with a resounding crash.

"What did I tell you?" he shouted.

Deputy Commissioner Burke heaved himself out of his chair and confronted the speaker.

"It isn't what *you* told *me!*" he shouted back. He turned his savage face in Markham's direction. "It's what *I* told you!"

Markham, cowed, as he was invariably cowed by this mood of his superior, tried to defend himself.

"What could I do?" he protested.

"Is he home?"

"Sure, he's home. But he's locked in his library with orders not to be disturbed."

"I knew it!" Regan shouted.

"What you know doesn't concern me!" Burke cried.

"Gentlemen," Stopford intervened, "don't be dam' silly. For God's sake *do* something."

"You're right!" said Burke.

He took up a 'phone.

"Send Captain Daly," he directed, and replaced the receiver.

He turned to Markham.

"Go out and get Judge Walsingham," he ordered tersely. "Chase him, if he's from home, but get him, and put him through to me here."

Markham hurried from the room, colliding with Police Captain Daly who was hurrying in.

"Daly," Burke went on without pause, "take a raid squad and go to ex-Governor Bronson's and demand to see him. He isn't President yet. He's a plain citizen. If you're refused, smash the library door. But you don't have to come back till you've *seen Bronson!* Got it clear?"

"All clear, Chief."

"Wait for powers. Report to me, here, before you start."

"Very good, Chief."

"Beat it. Get busy."

Dr. Stopford busily burnished his monocle.

"Good work," he murmured—"clean, sparklin' work."

CHAPTER XXX

Tom Flynn

§ I

DRAKE ROSCOE looked around him.

He was in a small cave, quite untouched by artifice, except that a heavy oak framework had been fitted to the entrance and a stout door set in. This door he knew to be bolted.

The place was furnished with a table, a stool, and a divan with mattresses. It was lighted by an electric bulb higher than a man could reach even by standing on the table. Clearly enough he was not the first occupant.

Twelve feet up in one wall was a ragged opening.

Roscoe's handcuffs had been removed by the tongueless negro who had escorted him to the place. At the moment of release from their torment he had weighed chances. His numbed arms and useless hands had decided the issue. He must wait.

He dropped down on to the divan. His pipe and tobacco were still in his pocket. And now, the agony in his arms having passed and muscles being restored again to normal, he lighted a pipe and began to think.

"Boss!"

Roscoe started, taking his pipe from between his teeth.

"Lieutenant!"

He jumped to his feet and looked up.

A bearded face protruded from the opening above! It was that of the blind guide.

"Yes?" said Roscoe sharply, ashamed of his panic.

"You don't recall me, sir. I didn't know, not when we was comin'! My eyes is gone, you see, and you never spoke. Besides, there's times when I'm cuckoo an' all! But I'm Tom Flynn, sir, that was bo'sun in the old *Corcoran.*"

"The *Corcoran!*" Roscoe exclaimed, and stared up into the sightless eyes. "Flynn! By God! It *is!* Flynn! Flynn! Can you get me out?"

"As easy as kiss me hand. But if ye should note me goin' cuckoo just slug me in the ribs, Lieutenant dear. Hoof up the wall. Here's a line."

The end of a rope dropped at Roscoe's feet. He dashed out the smouldering tobacco from his pipe and put the briar in his pocket. Fiercely, he massaged his wrists, still numb from long confinement. Then, grasping the rope and using his feet on the irregular wall, he went up, hand over hand.

In the narrow tunnel above, he grasped Tom Flynn's hard fist.

"God bless you!" he said. "What are you doing here, with this gang?"

"It isn't that I'm with the gang, sir," Flynn replied, and his voice was infinitely pathetic. "But they've taken my caves—and I love them. I know every inch of them. There's supposed to be no way through here! But here we are! They think they know all. But there's miles and miles of wonder, sir, they've never seen—and never will

see. The woman is here to-night. I don't mind the women. But the prize swine of the bunch is here, too. Him I've marked—and me time will come!"

"Who d'you mean?"

"They call him Head Centre, Lieutenant. There's a god in these caves. He lives under the big falls. And he's told me that Head Centre . . ."

Roscoe banged his fist into Flynn's ribs.

"Talk sense, Flynn!" He ordered. "You're going cuckoo."

Flynn breathed deeply, rolling sightless eyes; then:

"Right you are, sir!" he said. "You saved me, you did. I *was* goin' again! What was I talkin' about? Oh, sure! Head Centre has to go back to-night around the lake. There's trouble at Entrance Number One."

"But how can I get out, Flynn?"

"Havin' heard the trouble about Entrance Number One, sir—I hear everything that's said down here!—I would suggest that way for your honour!"

"Then for heaven's sake lead me there!"

"Follow me, sir."

They began to crawl along the low tunnel. It was not high enough to allow a man to stand upright. It terminated in a cave, cone-shaped, where quartz sparkled in the gneiss as Flynn's torch broke through darkness.

"Ssh!" Flynn whispered. "We're above the great green temple! *He's* there—with the woman!"

A semi-circular rock corridor was traversed. At a point where the granite had been split in prehistoric ages, a wooden staircase led upward into immeasurable blackness.

"Three hundred steps!" said Flynn. "I helped build them!"

Their only light the solitary torch, they climbed three hundred steps. Now they were in a winding rock gallery, ascending. And this they followed for all of ten minutes, until it terminated at a heavy wooden door.

"It isn't locked," said Flynn.

Like a clammy mantle, the ghastly unreality of it all descended upon Roscoe. Flynn—remembered, now, but long forgotten; a figure of his early days in the Navy: sightless, half-mad, but walking these unsuspected paths far below the city with intimate certainty!

"Flynn!" he said—"Flynn! Wait a minute. This is all a nightmare to me! *You* found these caves, I know. But why did you never tell anybody?"

"Ah!" Flynn switched his torch off. They were mantled in impenetrable darkness. "Now I can see you, sir! Listen! They're *my* caves. Is that plain? I've spent years of me life explorin' them. They're a new world—or a very, very old world. But they belong to a different god entirely. It's only *me* that knows him."

"Flynn! Show a light!"

"Not even for your honour! Because why? Because I can see you, Lieutenant dear, now, but I can't see you when the light's on! Don't be afraid. No friend of mine has anything to fear in the caves. Let me tell you: They stole them from me! One of the gang was me neighbour—hell burn him! To-day the little house I had is pulled down and the entrance to the caves bricked in."

"They found another entrance then?"

"Two. Meself had climbed the chimney before these devils came. I had it charted. I knew it led nearly to the

city level. They built the stairs your honour came down. They took over the house on top and had a cutting made to the cellar. They call it Entrance Number Two."

"There's another entrance?" Roscoe asked eagerly.

"There is. Number One. They found it themselves—and it's the way they mostly use. It opens into the house of ex-Governor Bronson."

"What!"

"I said it. One day you shall see the charts. They use the great green temple as an office! It was carven out by folk who lived on the American Continent before the history books begin! They died ten thousand years ago. But their god lives still—under the falls . . ."

"Easy, Flynn! You're slipping, man!"

Roscoe groped in the darkness, but failed to establish touch with the crazy speaker. Then:

"Don't worry, sir!" said Flynn. "You're helpless—blind. But *I* can see! I'm meself again. We must push on."

A ray from his torch spat into the darkness. Roscoe was dazzled.

"Where, on the chart, is this place located?" he asked.

"Meanin' on the city map?"

"Sure."

"As near as makes no matter, we're under the middle of Times Square! There's moments—I don't know why—when you can hear the subway trains up above! But the big cavern over the lake is under Central Park. Come on, sir."

A long wooden staircase having no turnings or landings was negotiated. It terminated in a tunnel artificially

made—a sort of mine-cutting supported by timber. A second door was come to. It was unlocked. They passed on. A final passage, short and low, and the last door—an iron one.

"Generally," said Flynn, "damn him, he locks this one!"

He grasped the door.

It was locked, but——

"Listen!" said Roscoe. "Listen!"

From some place beyond the door came a muted clamour.

The crazy custodian of the caverns and Drake Roscoe listened, holding their breath.

"*I* say," cried an angry man—his voice reached them as though coming through bales of wool—"that if Governor Bronson isn't here—and he isn't!—there's another way out!"

Then:

"Beat it back, Flynn!" Roscoe said. "You may be missed. Count on me, Bo'sun. Your caves will make you famous!"

"You're not out yet, Lieutenant!"

"I soon will be! Go back!"

"Right, sir!" Flynn raised his hand in salute. "I've got to guide Head Centre to the Gallery to-night. There's a god of this place, Boss . . . Head Centre may lose his way!"

"Hi! Flynn!"

But the masters of the caverns had departed at a run . . . he was gone. His voice, crying out unintelligible things, echoed weirdly through the tunnels. And now:

"'Hoy, there!" Roscoe bellowed, his mouth and

hands used as megaphone, close to the iron door. "Party *'hoy!*"

He had a magnificent sea voice. The babel in Lou Bronson's library subsided, and:

"Who's there?" cried Police Captain Daly.

"Commander Drake Roscoe! I'm locked behind an iron door. Find your way to it! Smash everything! Have someone 'phone for gear to burst the lock! Hurry! It's urgent!"

The order spoken, he pressed his ear to the door, and heard:

"Strip those cases! You, Fisher, get Headquarters! Have Arnold come right away! Tell the chief what's happened! Go to it, boys!"

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, according to Roscoe's calculations. Alone, unarmed, in darkness, he waited: always listening, not to the discords beyond the iron door, but for footsteps behind him.

She had said "an hour." When he was found to be missing, what would the Zones do?

Suddenly came a crash, and:

"This way, Chief!" a voice cried out; then:

"All O. K., sir?" someone called.

"Still alive!" shouted Roscoe. "What's happened?"

"Big business," came a familiar voice. "*I'm* here."

"Burke!'

"Sure thing! We've found the door in the bookcase. But this iron job may take time. Stand away, Roscoe. We're going to breathe on it."

Through the door, hissingly, came the voice of a powerful blow-light. They were fusing the lock.

Then, behind, in the darkness, running footsteps!

It was all too late! The Zones had awakened to their peril!

Roscoe watched a luminous patch in the blackness, where the rescuers were cutting through the iron door of his prison. He turned, as:

"Lieutenant!" came in panting tones. "They've missed you! But don't worry, Boss! Here's the key! Head Centre has gone—like the god of the caves said! He's under the falls."

Now came the ray of Flynn's torch. A key was pressed into Roscoe's hand.

"I'm goin' back," said Flynn. "The caves need me. But these is me last words, Lieutenant dear: the Zones has got the stairs *mined!* Is that clear? Good enough! Head Centre's gone to pay his bill to the god of the caves. It's up to me that devil a soul comes down again!"

The light went out.

"Flynn!" Roscoe cried.

Out of the darkness:

"You'll be free in five minutes, Lieutenant. Clear the house! God bless your honour!". . . .

"Flynn!"

Roscoe's voice was raised to gale register.

There was no reply. Flying footsteps were his only answer.

"Belay, there!" he roared.

The dim luminance died out. Hissing ceased.

None too steadily, he fitted the key in the lock outlined in a glow of heated metal. It worked stiffly. But it worked.

Drake Roscoe opened the door.

He saw a small room, presumably a dressing room. It appeared to be crowded. Stopford sprang forward.

"Old man!" he said.

Drake Roscoe fell into his arms, hung there a moment, helpless, then:

"Clear this house!" he ordered. "Don't waste a second! Every soul in the building must be out in three minutes! Stand away from that door! Send a man to the first police 'phone and get the Fire Department. All out! *All out!*"

He staggered, and collapsed. . . .

The house was cleared inside two minutes. The street became choked with curious onlookers. They dispersed when the wail of approaching fire units gave warning.

Then:

A colossal explosion shook the entire section. Many windows were blown out of the Bronson house. A dull glow showed through shattered panes on the ground floor. Red juggernauts of the Fire Department came roaring to the scene.

Roscoe revived temporarily. He was in Burke's car anxiously attended by Stopford.

"Entrance Number One is closed," he murmured, "forever."

CHAPTER XXXI

The Cardinal's Garden

§ I

"WHO's there?" cried Peter Champion.

A door at one end of the long room opened. Police Captain Daly came in.

"Hell!" said Peter Champion, and glanced apologetically in the direction of the only woman present.

She smiled forgiveness. Everybody was clewed up to tensest pitch, and Molly O'Hay understood. The niece of Deputy Commissioner Burke could readily excuse a harsh phrase from an excited man.

"No news," Daly reported.

Dr. Stopford removed his monocle and began to polish it as though this task were his only job in life. Drake Roscoe put an arm around his shoulders and gripped hard.

"Keep hold of yourself, old man!" he said quietly. "She will be found."

"I'm sure of it," Burke declared without conviction. He looked toward his niece. "I wish I'd taken Page Sutton's advice, though," he added, "and packed you off to Europe with your friend. Even Soviet Russia would be more healthy than this!"

Page Sutton nodded agreement. He had sent his daughter away with a party of friends a week earlier.

Molly O'Hay had prevailed upon her uncle—largely through the influence of his brother, kindly Father Burke—to allow her to remain a while longer. A close observer might have come to the conclusion that the presence of Drake Roscoe had something to do with her earnest wish to stay.

But, certainly, the country home of Peter Champion was no place for a rest cure these days.

Ex-Governor Bronson had disappeared under mysterious circumstances. The Bronson home, in New York, had been partially destroyed by fire. Popularly, it was supposed that Lou Bronson had perished in the flames. Only Roscoe knew the astounding truth.

John Wilberforce Wright, now almost certainly future President, had been compelled, by political affairs, to leave New York. He was covered by a battalion of detectives.

Peter Champion and Page Sutton were his most influential backers. The Zones were out to defeat Wright. Peter Champion's country home was a good deal like a beleaguered fortress.

The brains controlling defensive measures against the most formidable criminal organization in history were gathered in the house. Armoured planes, adjacent, were in readiness to take the air. Three military searchlights had been placed at selected points in case of a night attack by Zone air units—operating from their so-far untraceable base. The grounds were patrolled day and night. The immediate neighbourhood was to all intents and purposes under martial law.

Such was the menace of the Zones.

It was felt that, until the Presidential die had been

cast, anything might happen. Drake Roscoe distrusted every inch of New York City. And so the staff headquarters had been moved outside suspected areas.

And now, Stopford, having regained control of himself, turned to Ned W. Regan. At this phase of the campaign against Great Head Centre, they had assumed definite duties. The famous investigator was responsible for policing the grounds of the house. The job was entirely in the hands of members of his vast staff.

"I put it to you, Regan," Stopford said quietly. "You've examined every square inch of the place, inside and out. It bristles with blokes trained to hear a mouse breathin'—yet a member of the party goes for a stroll . . . and doesn't come back!"

"She hasn't passed the gates," Police Captain Daly assured him. "My men would challenge a fly!"

Burke's police were responsible for covering the house. Daly was in charge.

"It's still broad daylight," said Peter Champion hoarsely, and addressing Regan. "She was seen by your man, Stevens, going down to the Cardinal's Garden——"

"The other man," Stopford broke in, "what's-his-name, on duty at end of said garden, reports she didn't come out that way! What's the answer?"

"There's no trace and no clue in the garden," Drake Roscoe assured him gravely. "You were with us, Stoppy, when we examined it."

Molly O'Hay crossed the room and rested a hand on Stopford's shoulder.

"I'm dreadfully unhappy, too," she whispered, and her eyes were very bright. "I love Fée . . ."

Fée Czerna, ex-victim of the Zones, and Stopford's wife to be, had vanished, unaccountably, magically, from their midst!

§ II

In the white-domed room the Duchesse de Greuze was seated. She wore a black velvet robe which fitted her like a second skin. Her white arms and shoulders were bare. Hoops of diamonds depended from her ears.

She extended her hand. A slender finger touched a button on a keyboard. In the lacquer cabinet a red light sprang to life.

"G.H.Q.," said a guttural voice.

"Report," the duchesse directed, in coldly unemotional tones, "of Divisional Chief B."

"To hand. Divisional Chief B, in personal charge of party covering Champion home, reports that area is divided as follows: House and grounds patrolled by men under Ned W. Regan; from outside by police under Deputy Commissioner Burke—Police Captain Daly in charge. Air squad units located as follows: Two planes at Seeger's Farm, one at Beach Meadow. Military anti-aircraft parties with lights, no guns, at three points not yet identified. Timed 6:30. Report ends."

"Report of Zone Officer 2 C."

"To hand. Zone Officer 2 C reports that, operating from cutting under Champion home, Group Master 1, Zone X, carried out instructions re ex-Zone officer Fée Czerna. Standing by. Timed 6:40. Report ends."

A moment of silence followed, and then:

"Report," the duchesse directed, "of Group master inside Champion home."

"To hand. Entire staff given a week's vacation. Employees of Ned W. Regan have replaced. Standing by at station. This report timed 5 P.M."

"It should have been transmitted immediately," the cold voice replied. "This is gross negligence. Connect Staff Officer 3."

A further interval of silence, until:

"Staff 3," came in suave, modulated tones.

"Take over," the woman ordered. "Staff Officer 2 is to stand by pending inquiry. An order is coming."

Further silence. The white room seemed to be removed from the world, it was so still; then:

"Instruct all Divisional chiefs to stand by under emergency routine," the duchesse ordered. "This order cancels all foregoing. Zone Officer 2 C is to concentrate upon the niece of Deputy Commissioner Burke. This is urgent. Ex-Zone Officer Fée Czerna is to be brought to G.H.Q. at once. Move."

The red light in the lacquer cabinet went out.

§ III

"Manhattan is honeycombed with caverns," said Drake Roscoe. "So much I know. The fact must never be made public. But what I'm thinking is this: the geological formation of Long Island is much the same. So, why not Long Island as well?"

There was an awkward silence. Since the fire at the Bronson home, from which Roscoe had been rescued in an unconscious condition, opinion had been much divided on the subject of the extraordinary story he had had to

tell. Regan more or less frankly admitted he didn't believe it. He put it down to delirium.

The idea that the city, universally supposed to rest upon solid rock, actually stood on the roof of a vast series of caves, was too unpleasant to bear thinking about. But one point in the story Regan was disposed to accept unconditionally—that ex-Governor Bronson was Head Centre. It was a theory he had held for some time. He welcomed confirmation.

"How does it help us, any way?" Burke asked.

"It may not help us," Roscoe replied. "But it might explain Fée's disappearance."

"Gad!" cried Stopford—"got you! Got you, old scout!"

"I'm kind of hazy on one point," Page Sutton broke in. "If Head Centre is dead—and you seem to think he is, Roscoe—why are the Zones still active? And what have they got to gain, now, anyway, from kidnapping Madame Czerna?"

Drake Roscoe stared hard at the speaker; then:

"This," he said: "They can tie our hands. Head Centre has gone, or so I believe, but Great Head Centre remains. Only *I* know the identity of Great Head Centre. I haven't shared the secret with anybody, yet. If I had, it would have been with the five people here in this room. If we six could be silenced . . ."

"I've been in some danger spots in my life," Peter Champion said to Page Sutton. "But none of us was ever nearer sudden death than we are to-night right here in my own home."

Following a short interval:

"With Roscoe's theory in view," said Stopford evenly, "what if we give another once-over to the Cardinal's Garden?"

His suggestion was immediately acted upon. Inertia was insufferable in the circumstances. And presently in the early dusk a party set out to investigate, again, the apparently insoluble problem of Fée Czerna's disappearance.

Page Sutton and Peter Champion remained behind. Regan, Burke, Roscoe, and Stopford formed the quartette which made for the scene of the mystery.

Stopford's acceptance of the situation was heroic. As they walked through the dusk away from the house, Roscoe glanced aside at his friend—who had lost the woman he loved and who knew, too well, in what peril she must be at this moment. For Fée Czerna's disappearance could mean only one thing: the Zones.

"Old man," he said, "I prevailed on you to bring her back to New York, to help us with her knowledge of the damned Zone gang! This is all my fault."

Stopford walked on for ten paces, then:

"Shut up, old scout," he implored. "You're makin' me feel sentimental."

"I still think," said Roscoe, following a short silence, "that she's safe. She's being held as a hostage. The Manhattan caves were a temporary headquarters. I believe *Great* Headquarters to be located in Long Island —and I hope for much from the house-to-house search now going on."

" 'Hope springs eternal'," Stopford murmured dully.

"There's some big base near us," Roscoe assured him. "And there's one other hope, Stoppy: Tom Flynn, the

master of the caves. He's blind and half-mad. But if she's been taken to the caves, and Flynn can get in touch with me——"

A hidden watched challenged them.

"O. K.," said Ned Regan. "Anything to report?"

"Not a thing, Chief."

Then, at the head of the steps leading to the Cardinal's Garden:

"Go easy," said a voice. "Who's this?"

It was growing rapidly darker.

"All clear, Stevens," said Ned Regan. "Any report?"

"No news, Chief."

They went down the steps. In the dying light the garden looked romantically beautiful. It was a reproduction of that at Hampton Court Palace, lovingly copied under Peter Champion's supervision, and known as "the Cardinal's Garden." Trees were silhouetted against a perfect sky. Only distant pastoral sounds interrupted the peace—a peace which was utterly chimerical. One could well have conjured up a vision of a cardinal, red-robed, pacing in meditation those moss-lined paths.

Before the sundial—a Sixteenth Century piece imported by Champion—they paused.

"Odd," Stopford murmured, "but I thought I heard a strange voice!"

CHAPTER XXXII

The Sundial

§ I

Fée Czerna heard and felt the elevator stop. She was pushed forward.

The scarf covering her eyes was of thin enough texture to enable her to see that she was now in a lighted place, whereas hitherto she had moved in darkness.

Details were hazy. She had walked out into the gardens and had determined to go as far as the old sundial. Then—something had happened.

She had passed the detective on duty at the gate in the tall hedge, and had gone down the steps. She could not recall, now, if he would have been able to see her from where he was posted. But . . . something about the garden had been different: it had had an unfamiliar appearance.

Then the unrememberable had happened. . . .

The scarf was untied by someone who stood behind her. A faint sound of well-oiled mechanism told her that the elevator door had been closed. The elevator descended.

But Fée Czerna did not look around. She stood staring, staring, at the woman seated before her—sole occupant of the amazing white-domed room, which seemingly possessed neither doors nor windows. Through the

eye slits in a black half mask this woman watched her fixedly.

Fée Czerna's composure was wonderful. But one who has known the hell of Devil's Island and been an active but unwilling member of the Zones is not entirely as others.

The masked woman spoke.

"Zone Officer 2 A," she said coldly, "you were found to be a traitor to us almost exactly one year ago tonight. The Zones may work slowly, but they cast their nets wide. Your removal from the rolls has been in the orders since last September."

Fée made no reply, and:

"The raid on old Headquarters, New York," the calm voice went on remorselessly, "and the arrest of a number of valuable officers, was your work. Recently, again, you all but ruined our plans. Have you anything to say?"

"Nothing."

The word sounded hollowly, mockingly, in the silence of the domed room.

§ II

"What I'm asking you," said New W. Regan, "is this: either immediately before or immediately after Madame Czerna passed you, did you hear or see anything unusual in the Cardinal's Garden?"

"Nothing, Chief," the man replied earnestly.

"A while ago," Burke broke in, "as we were out there, we thought we heard a funny noise down by the far end, near the sundial."

Stevens, of Ned W. Regan's Agency, the man who

had been on duty at the north end of the garden when Fée Czerna had gone down, looked from face to face. At last he looked at Regan, and:

"There's no query about *me,* Chief," he asked quietly, "is there?"

"None at all," Roscoe replied. "But we're all as puzzled as you."

"Good enough," said Stevens. "I only wanted to know."

"Thing is," Stopford broke in, "that you an' the bloke at the other end, Cumper, are our only hopes!"

"Cumper's right enough," Stevens interjected.

"No doubt," Stopford agreed. "But between the pair of you, somebody has faded into thin air!"

There was a brief interval. Then:

"That's true enough, sir," Stevens admitted. "I can't deny it."

"An idea occurs to me," said Roscoe. "From where you were standing, Stevens, could you see right along to the other end of the garden?"

"No, Commander! Because, you see, I wasn't *standing.* I was sitting on the bench just this side of the gate —with my back to the garden."

"Ah!" Roscoe murmured. Then: "Regan," he said, "call Cumper again."

Regan stood up and went to the door. Opening it:

"Cumper!" he shouted.

A moment later Cumper came in. He was as sanguine in type as his *confrère,* Stevens, was saturnine.

"Yes, Chief?"

"Something has occurred to me, Cumper," Roscoe went on. "You have reported that you saw nothing of

Madame Czerna in the sunken garden. Did you mean that you didn't see her come out or didn't see her go in?"

"I didn't see her go in *or* come out," was the prompt reply. "My job was the orchard. I had my back to the garden."

"Gad!" Stopford cried. "It's gettin' clearer! There was a period, Roscoe, durin' which *nobody* was watchin' the garden!"

"The period," Roscoe continued, "during which she vanished." He paused, glancing around the room; then: "Who's on duty above and below the garden now?" he asked suddenly.

"Nobody," Regan replied. "Stevens and Cumper were called in to report. They haven't been replaced. But what's the odds? We're all here."

"No, we're not!" Stopford exclaimed. "Where's Miss O'Hay?"

"Eh!" growled Burke from the shadowy end of the long room.

"She'll be changing," said Page Sutton. "This thing has upset household plans and we're all staying the way we are hoping for dinner when we get it. But she's a woman."

"Gad!" said Stopford. "She told me she had a theory about Fée's disappearance! Can she have slipped away to investigate?"

Roscoe crossed to the door, opened it, and went out. He ran the length of a long corridor and came to a lobby. He pressed a bell.

Almost immediately a man came—one of Regan's staff.

"Go to Miss O'Hay's room," Roscoe instructed, "and see if she's there."

"Very good, sir."

The man started up the open oaken staircase, seeming to walk very slowly. He crossed a gallery, above, and disappeared. A short interval followed, and then the man reappeared, recrossing the gallery on his way to the stairhead.

"Is she there?" Roscoe called.

The man looked over the rail.

"No, sir," he reported. "Mrs. Leslie," (one of Regan's employees who had taken the place of the maid formerly looking after Miss O'Hay) "tells me that she hasn't been to her room all evening."

Drake Roscoe's tanned face became suddenly very drawn and angular.

"Have *you* seen Miss O'Hay?"

"No, sir; not since about half-past six when the French lady disappeared."

Roscoe turned, crossed the lobby, and ran out into the dusk of the porch. A man confronted him.

"Has Miss O'Hay gone out?"

"No, sir—not this way."

Roscoe ran around to the door leading out from Champion's library. One of Regan's staff was on duty, and:

"Has Miss O'Hay gone out?" Roscoe repeated.

"No one has come out this way since before six o'clock."

He passed on to the entrance to the servants' quarters. Molly O'Hay had not come out there.

There was one other way: the door at the end of the

long conservatory where Champion's gardener raised the prize chrysanthemums. Roscoe came to it, breathless. A man stepped out of the bushes which grew close up to the outbuilding, and:

"Commander Roscoe," said the runner. "You know me. Quick! Has Miss O'Hay been this way?"

"Yes, sir. Ten minutes ago. She went down the path yonder—toward the orchard where Cumper's on duty."

Roscoe stood stock still for a moment. Then he set out running again. He ran along the path the man had indicated. It brought him to the fringe of an orchard. On his left was a high box hedge. At a point where its green smoothness was broken by a wicket gate he pulled up, opened the gate, and looked down and across the Cardinal's Garden, lovely in the moonlight.

Figures were moving on the steps at the other end.

" 'Hoy!" Roscoe hailed. "Who's there?"

"Regan!" came back. "Have you found her?"

Drake Roscoe didn't reply. He was glad nobody could see him.

The Cardinal's Garden had claimed a second victim!

§ III

Stevens was badly ruffled. In all his association with Ned W. Regan's internationally famous agency, he had never before been caught napping. Two hours had elapsed since his cross-examination in the library; but he was still sore. It was understandable, and he knew he was excused. But it was laxity. Used to the presence of Madame Czerna about the grounds, he had watched her go down to the old garden, had thought how beau-

tiful she was, had sighed for his lost youth, and had sunk back on the rustic bench.

Yet, between his post and Cumper's, she had vanished!

And now—again—during the fifteen minutes that the Cardinal's Garden had been unwatched, the dear little Irish girl, Molly O'Hay, had gone the same way!

Of one thing Stevens was sure, and he had kept it grimly in view throughout the time that had elapsed: no more would go!

There had been such a search as must have discovered a needle in a haystack. No inch of the place had escaped examination. But never a vestige of a clue had they found. From his post, in the rare intervals when he removed his eyes from the garden, he could see lights in Peter Champion's library.

And indeed at this very moment there had been a dramatic development—which might mean little or might mean much. Detective Ellis, one of Burke's star men, had just come in to report. The group in the library stood watching him intently as he spoke.

"The only house in a five-mile radius not yet accounted for, Chief," said he; "the white house on the hill that was built for Michael Gollancz——"

"It's empty," Burke rapped, "except for a caretaker."

"No, it isn't!" Ellis assured him grimly. "I found a place where I could climb the wall to-night! And that house, sir, is full of people!"

"What!" cried Roscoe.

"Secret people moving behind closed shutters; people

who never appear outside! So . . . how do they get in?"

"We'll soon settle the point!" said Burke savagely. "Assemble all available cars. Have Daly in charge. I want everything ready to raid that house in five minutes from now!"

"Great Head Centre!" Roscoe exclaimed. "I begin to see light! There's something I must do. If I'm late, start without me."

Meanwhile, down at his lonely post, Stevens lighted a cigarette and turned again to stare over the wicket gate.

He dropped his cigarette and set his heel on it. . . .

Something in the Cardinal's Garden was different!

In vain he tried to tell himself that his imagination was playing tricks. Plain fact answered him.

The sundial had altered.

Trained to swift action, Stevens plunged for his automatic—when his hand was seized and held from behind!

He turned in a flash.

Drake Roscoe stood at his elbow!

"Stay where you are," Roscoe ordered. "If Cumper moves tell him to stick to his post. If I shout 'Carry on,' whatever I do, or whatever happens, stay here. This garden must be covered all the time."

Then, before Stevens could reconquer his stupefaction, Roscoe went racing down the steps. On he ran, around the tiled path, and pulled up short before the sundial.

The front of the square pedestal had disappeared! Where it had been was a black cavity!

"Who's there?" Cumper hailed from his post.

"Stand by where you are!" cried Roscoe, and shot a torch ray into the cavity.

He had come prepared for other measures, suddenly inspired by Ellis's report. This development was wholly unforeseen.

The light shone fully upon a bearded, wild-eyed face —that of a man standing in the hollow under the sundial so that his shoulders were no higher than Roscoe's knees!

"Thank God I've found you so soon, Lieutenant dear!" said the apparition. "But dowse the glim. It blinds me!"

"Tom Flynn, by all that's holy!"

"The same, your honour. Was you expectin' me like?"

"I wasn't, Flynn. It's Fate."

"It's the god of the caves, your honour! Quick! Ye have ten minutes to save the colleen! Stoop and come down!"

"Where are we going?"

"To the big house on the hill. They call it G.H.Q."

"I knew it!" Roscoe shouted. He turned: "Carry on!" he roared.

He stooped and entered the cavity.

CHAPTER XXXIII

G. H. Q.

§ I

THE raid had been fixed by timing. There were to be no whistles. At a prearranged moment the entire party, distributed at seven different points of the almost unbroken wall, were to go over the top and rush for the house.

Surprise was supremely important, Burke argued.

Now, watch in hand, he stood with a group of five raiders—waiting. The night was perfect, and still. From the distant house, beyond its guardian walls, no sound came. Then:

"Go to it, boys!" said Burke. "Hang on to this ladder, you."

Gripping a long cigar between his teeth, Deputy Commissioner Burke went up the ladder, personally leading the raid. The high summit gained, grapnels were reversed, and the ladders lowered on the further side.

Burke's party found themselves in a derelict kitchen garden among a wilderness of raspberry canes. Further north a second party under Ellis came over in full view. No greetings were exchanged. Automatics ready, they all ran for the house.

Other parties carried hatchets and crowbars.

"If Roscoe's right," Burke panted, "and we've got to the hub of the trouble, this is the end of the Zones!"

At which time, below in the cutting under Peter Champion's garden, Drake Roscoe watched his half-demented guide operate the simple, counter-weighted gear which opened and closed the pedestal supporting the sundial.

"It was made more'n a year ago," said Tom Flynn. "They had Champion covered from the time he bought the house. He was one of the geese that laid the golden eggs. When he had the old garden made, it was the Zones did the job for him!"

"What's that, Flynn?"

"I said it. The workmen that put up the sundial was Zone men! They fitted this liftin' gear, your honour, at the same time. There! It's shut now, and devil a soul would be the wiser! Shine the light of your torch on me back, Lieutenant, and follow close."

They were in a rough cutting, timber propped, ending apparently at the piece of mechanism controlling the ingenious device in the base of the sundial. The mystery of the two abductions was solved.

"Flynn," said Roscoe, as he followed that wild guide, "who kidnapped the colleen?"

"The nigger!" came promptly. "Group Master 1, they call him. He's marked. The god of the falls wants him . . ."

"Go easy, Flynn. Keep a grip on yourself. Where are we heading for now?"

"Right you are, sir! We're for G.H.Q.—the house that they bought from Mike Gollancz because it was over a gorge of the caverns."

"The caverns!" Roscoe exclaimed. "But the river is between here and Manhattan!"

"Small difference!" Flynn called back. "The caves is far below the river bed. There's four passages goes under, but only one that can be used. It crosses under Hell Gate and there's three curtains of water, Boss, that I was the first to pass! *They* wear rubbers when they cross. Stop, Boss!"

They had reached a point where the cutting entered a rugged, sloping corridor of nearly black rock.

"Dowse the glim!"

Roscoe extinguished the torch.

" 'Port' is the route to Manhattan," said Flynn. " 'Starboard' is the way to G.H.Q. Listen! You'll hear the water."

Silbilant, distant, whispering through the subterranean silence, came a sound of falling water.

Then, as they listened, came a harsher sound, from the opposite direction! Shots . . . muffled . . . cries . . . a vague clamour . . . more shots.

"Good God!" said Roscoe. "Burke has raided the house! Listen! What's this?"

Approaching footsteps, many of them, and all those of runners, became audible above the dim uproar.

"Sure, it's the staff leavin'!" said Flynn calmly. "Draw back a step, Lieutenant dear. They'll go straight ahead!"

Possessed by a sense of nightmare phantasy such as he had never known, Drake Roscoe from the shelter of the cutting watched a headlong procession race past. It was like the passage of condemned demons flying back to Hell. Each man carried a torch; and Roscoe

counted twenty. Identification was impossible. None glanced aside.

As the last straggler went by, craning from the angle:

"They'll be waitin' for me at the Purple Gate," said Flynn. "That's what we call it. An' I'm told its walls is made of amethysts. They'll wait forever."

"What d'you mean?"

"They're doomed, your honour! There's a great fire on East Side of the city to-night. Entrance Number Two, the only one they know, now, was blown up an hour ago! Quick! Here's more!"

Lighting his way with an electric torch, a man came down the rock corridor. He was a thin, ascetic-looking German. Close on his heels came a huge negro uttering guttural ejaculations. He carried an insensible woman in his arms.

"Back, your honour!" whispered Flynn. "Group Master 1! Leave him to me!"

Roscoe grasped Flynn in no uncertain hold.

"Wait!" He spoke in the ex-bo'sun's ear. "There's someone else!"

A woman whose wrists were bound behind her came along in the wake of the negro. A man bearing a torch followed.

"There's too much light," Flynn complained. "I can't see!"

"Knock out the first light," Roscoe ordered in a low voice, "and deal with Group Master 1! Leave the other to me."

The negro was carrying Fée Czerna! The woman,

white-faced, desperate, but still undaunted, who stumbled along behind him, was Molly O'Hay!

"All set, your honour!"

§ II

The red light in the lacquer cabinet faded out. Great Head Centre had issued her last order.

Into the quietude of the white-domed room broke discords of sound human and mechanical. Hatchets were at work beyond the western wall. There came a great wrenching and tearing from under the floor. Hoarse voices spoke unintelligibly.

The Duchesse de Greuze stood up. Her coldly beautiful face was pale as marble.

Taking up the lacquer cabinet, she tore it from the cable with which it was connected and dashed it to the floor. Momentarily the mask melted. Her features were those of Medusa the Destroyer.

Then she crossed to a panel in the circular wall and pressed a button concealed in the framework.

In the interval which followed, the head of a hatchet made a momentary appearance through a panel behind the long table.

The hidden door behind which the duchesse stood, opened. It revealed the car of an elevator.

Drake Roscoe stepped out.

For immeasurable moments the two faced one another; then:

"Because you are the last to leave the sinking ship," said Roscoe, " I admire you. You'd have made a grand

sailor. But for Great Head Centre I haven't a scrap of sympathy."

The hatchet triumphed. Police Captain Daly crashed into the room, shedding mother-of-pearl about him like confetti. Deputy Commissioner Burke followed, paused, picked up his cigar, and:

"My niece!" he said, looking at Roscoe.

"Safe! So is Madame Czerna. There's been murder, I'm afraid, but they are both back in Champion's home now."

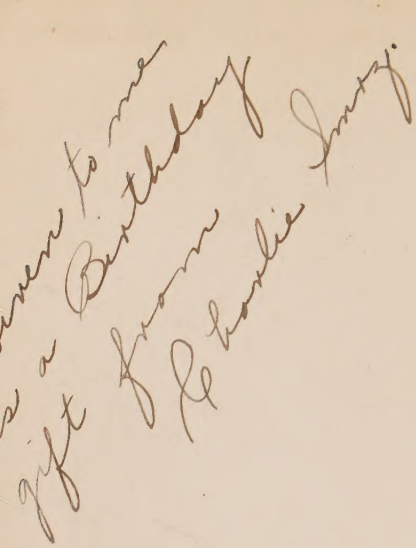
Burke turned to the woman. Members of the raiding party were coming in through the opening. The wrenching and tearing below the floor carried on unremittingly.

"Duchesse," said the deputy commissioner, "this is the most embarrassing moment of my life . . ."

"The Duchesse de Greuze," Roscoe interrupted, "has earned my respectful admiration. But she is *Great Head Centre.*"

"Duchesse," said Deputy Commissioner Burke, "you are under arrest."

THE END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